

THE RELIGIOUS THOUGHT OF ROBERTSON OF BRIGHTON

A Thesis  
submitted to the Faculty of Divinity  
of the University of Edinburgh  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the Ph. D. degree

by

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May 1946.



## P R E F A C E

This thesis is an exposition of the thought of Frederick W. Robertson concerning the major doctrines of the Christian Faith. It is impossible to extract a complete system of theology from the primary sources available to the analyst, namely: five volumes of sermons, notes on two series of lectures, letters included in Stopford Brook's Life and Letters of Frederick W. Robertson, and the miscellaneous volume of his work -- Lectures, Addresses and Literary Remains. Since the foundations of Robertson's belief were not really fixed until after his vacation on the continent in 1846, one could almost limit the period for study to the six years he spent at Trinity Chapel, Brighton. What we actually possess, then, are very definite roots, deeply centered in his being, from which a theological system would have no doubt developed had not his untimely death at the age of thirty-seven interrupted his career.

Some of the chapters of this thesis are exceedingly brief, yet I have chosen to discuss these subjects separately for the sake of clarity. The brevity results from my desire to exclude all irrelevancies.

The spelling used in this study is based upon the principles established by Noah Webster and is different in some cases to that commonly used in Great Britain.

My cordial thanks are due the Very Reverend  
Professor John Baillie, D. Litt., D. D., for his continuing  
interest and encouragement in my study.

T. L. S.

Portland, Oregon

May, 1946

## T A B L E o f C O N T E N T S

<u>CHAPTER ONE</u>	<u>Pages</u>
THE BACKGROUND OF ROBERTSON'S MINISTRY... ..	1
 <u>CHAPTER TWO</u>	
THE LIFE OF ROBERTSON OF BRIGHTON... ..	7
 <u>CHAPTER THREE</u>	
PRINCIPLES WHICH UNDERLIE ROBERTSON'S TEACHING ...	33
 <u>CHAPTER FOUR</u>	
ROBERTSON'S APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS FAITH - THE MORAL ARGUMENT... ..	41
 <u>CHAPTER FIVE</u>	
WHAT ROBERTSON TAUGHT CONCERNING OUR KNOWLEDGE OF GOD... ..	50
 <u>CHAPTER SIX</u>	
WHAT ROBERTSON TAUGHT CONCERNING OUR KNOWLEDGE OF CHRIST ... ..	61
 <u>CHAPTER SEVEN</u>	
THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY ... ..	69

	<u>Pages</u>
<u>CHAPTER EIGHT</u>	
THE NATURE OF SIN ... ..	71
<u>CHAPTER NINE</u>	
THE PROBLEM OF NATURAL EVIL ... ..	77
<u>CHAPTER TEN</u>	
ROBERTSON'S THEORY OF IMMORTALITY... ..	79
<u>CHAPTER ELEVEN</u>	
THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH ... ..	85
<u>CHAPTER TWELVE</u>	
RETROSPECT. ... ..	90

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## B I B L I O G R A P H Y

i - iv

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CHAPTER ONE

THE BACKGROUND OF ROBERTSON'S MINISTRY

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, the religious life in England was largely Evangelical in thought and practice. From 1760 onward the spirit of the Wesleys gained influence in the Church of England until by the end of the century Evangelicalism was the chief force in the Church's life. In fact, it was the only type of aggressive religion then, or for some time. Religious life in general was at a very low ebb, and thoughtful churchmen were understandably alarmed. Arnold declared in 1832 that "no power can save the Churches as it now stand."<sup>1</sup> Hannah More and William Wilberforce, after a trip through rural England, reported they had found thirteen adjoining parishes without a resident curate, an entire district in which the only discoverable Bible was used to prop a flowerpot, and a village whose fighting incumbent, drunk six days a week, was said to appear frequently on Sundays with a black eye for which his parishioners were at a loss to account.<sup>2</sup> Further evidence of the deplorable state of the church can be seen in the fact that of the twenty-seven bishops in 1820 eleven were members of noble families, fourteen had been connected in some way with royal or noble families, one was a staunch pamphleteer of the Pitt regime, and the

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1. Stanley: Life of Arnold, p. 326

2. Steward: A Century of Anglo-Catholicism, p. 139



twenty-seventh the favorite of a great city company. Of his own boyhood experiences in the Church, James Anthony Froude says: "About doctrine, Evangelical or Catholic, I do not think I ever heard a single word, in Church or out of it...." 1

It is little wonder that Newman began his first Tract with the words, "The times are very evil." Still there were groups in various parts of the country -- the Clapham sect, the Simeonites -- which gave expression of genuine Evangelical zeal. Leaders like Wilberforce, Blomsfield and Simeon struggled desperately to keep the fires of the Evangelical movement aflame.

By the time Robertson entered Oxford, however, Evangelicalism was showing two fatal weaknesses. On the one hand, it clearly displayed its indifference to all intellectual interests. Even of the best of them, Tulloch writes: "They were essentially narrow and false. They destroyed the largeness and unity of human experience. They not merely separated religion from art and philosophy, but they tended to separate it from morality." 2

The second important characteristic of the 19th Century Evangelicalism was its tendency to degenerate into crude forms of dogmatic orthodoxy. As a result Evangelicalism became more and more dominated by the bigotry of the "Record," which in blind passion held fast to the tenets of its creed and challenged the right of any man to hold a different opinion.

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1. Ibid, p. 134

2. Tulloch, Movements of Religious Thought in Britian During the 19th Century, p. 13

Thus the Church of Robertson's boyhood was one of little intellectual effort, much of its life still closely related to the indifference of the 18th century, with here and there a show of evangelical enthusiasm.

Coleridge was the first of those who in the 18th century were to revolutionize the life of the Church. Influenced by his Platonic studies to pursue metaphysics as a religious task, and by his careful study of Kant to see the intimate connection between the moral life and religion, he went "to the heart of religion and laid anew its foundations in the natural instincts of man."<sup>1</sup> "It is to the distinction of Coleridge," writes Tulloch, "to have once more in his age made Christian doctrine alive to the Reason as well as to the Conscience -- tenable as a philosophy as well as an evangel. And this he did by interpreting Christianity in the light of our moral and spiritual life."<sup>2</sup>

Following Coleridge, there came three main movements, four, if the men of the Oriel School are to be included.

The Oxford Movement attempted to bring a revival of Christianity by a return to the dignity and apostolic authority of the Church. It came at a time when men were divided on the problem of the relation of Church and State. The Bill for the Emancipation of the Catholics, the disposition of the Irish

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1. Tulloch: Ibid, p. 5

2. Tulloch: Ibid, p. 19



Bishoprics in the Reform Bill of 1832, and the suggestion to allow non-churchmen to study at Oxford -- these incidents, coupled with the rising tide of political radicalism in France, and the growing realization that the high offices of the Church were being used largely as positions of preferment for those who were deemed worthy of patronage by the political leaders, justly filled the hearts of many churchmen with apprehension. Arnold attempted to solve the problem with a cry to return to the Reformation policy of the combination of Church and State, even proposing that the National Church be broadened to admit dissenters to its fellowship. But the little group who gathered around Newman and Pusey were more radical. They realized very clearly that if the Church was to have moral vitality, it must be made free from the entanglements of political alliances, and allowed to speak without regard to the powers that be. They hoped for a Church which owed allegiance to no man, whose bishops would be men chosen of the Holy Spirit. Quite naturally, therefore, they emphasized the doctrine of Apostolic Succession, and defied the State to reduce the "Bride of Christ" to the position of a political appendage to the ruling party at Westminster. Influenced by the Romantic Reaction, they dreamed of the Medieval Church as the ideal state of the sacred brotherhood. The Tracts denounced the latitudinarianism of English Christianity, opposed all compromises of the Church with the State, emphasized the ideals of the Sacramental life, and cen-

tered the authority of the Church in the Holy Spirit through the agency of the Divinely ordained ministry. The minister was to be a priest of God.

The whole underlying basis of this movement was moral. Dr. Brillioth, in his noteworthy book, "The Anglican Revival," considers the essential genius of the Tractarians to have been that of "Moralism." The aim of Newman and his companions was to increase the "Holiness of God's people and Church." Facing the unhappy situation of the Church, they sought to bring about a revival of genuine piety in the society of the Redeemed.

The Christian Socialists Movement, under the leadership of Frederick Denison Maurice and Charles Kingsley, was an attempt to apply Christianity to the social conditions which resulted from the Industrial Revolution. While the Puseyites had practically no interest in the appalling conditions under which the poorer classes lived and worked, Maurice and Kingsley believed that the Kingdom of God was a much larger sphere than that controlled by the episcopate. They contended that the Gospel of Christ should affect not only the individual piety of His followers, but the social and industrial order of the world. And, just as in the work of the Tractarians, it was the moral urge which was the driving force of the Christian Socialists movement; in the former the drive was toward a Christlike Church; in the latter, toward a Christlike society.

Robertson represents the third movement of the century which sprang from "moralism." The problem to which

he devoted his best thought and energy was more fundamental than the central problem of the other two movements. His concern was not the state of the Church as such, for while he ceased to be a member of the Evangelical School in any direct sense, he never really advanced beyond their conception of the Church as a voluntary organization of the followers of Christ. Nor was he primarily interested in a Christian industrial order, though his preaching indicates a sympathy with the efforts, if not with the conclusions, of the Christian Socialists. Robertson's consuming purpose was to justify the presence of the Moral Ought in the scheme of things - not the problem of moral authority, or moral application, but rather --  
Why morality at all?



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE LIFE OF ROBERTSON OF BRIGHTON

#### I

#### The Years Preceding His Ordination

Stopford A. Brooke, in his monumental work, the Life and Letters of the Reverend Frederick W. Robertson, has given to the world once and for all a record of the life of Robertson of Brighton. In this chapter, therefore, the external facts of Robertson's life are of secondary importance. Here we shall be concerned primarily with the forces, circumstances and incidents which gave direction to his life and influenced his preaching. For this information we must rely entirely upon his letters and the autobiographical material of his sermons.

In a sermon delivered in January, 1853, seven months before his death, Robertson described the object of a biographer as follows:

"....it is the first object of the biographer of a marvellous man to seek for surprising stories of his early life. The appetite for the marvellous in this matter is almost instinctive and invariable. Almost all men love to discover the early wonders which were prophetic of after-greatness....we seek eagerly for anecdotes of early precocity." 1

His life, however, was devoid of dramatic incidents, and there was little foreshadowing of the prominence which he was to gain among the leaders of religious thought in England.

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1. Sermons: Second Series, p. 177.

Robertson was born in London, February 3, 1816, the eldest of seven children of Captain Frederick Robertson of the Royal Artillery. To his parents he acknowledged an immense debt of gratitude, listing his home life as one of two special blessings which had come to him. (The second, being forced to read widely.) His formal education was more varied than the average, consisting of study in an English grammar school, a French seminary in Tours, the Edinburgh Academy, the University of Edinburgh, and finally in Brasenose College of Oxford University.

His experiences in school pale beside the glow of his enthusiasm for the military life. "I was rocked and cradled," he writes, "to the roar of artillery, and the very name of such things sounds to me like home. A review, suggesting the conception of a real battle, impresses me to tears; I cannot see a regiment manoeuvre, nor artillery in motion, without a choking<sup>1</sup> sensation."

His early ambition to follow his father in a military career never left him, and this wish was more than a "mere childish fancy to wear a red coat." To the very end of his life, he was a loyal soldier of the Cross, a defender of truth, and a crusader in behalf of the underprivileged. The illustrations in his sermons bear witness to his passionate interest in the soldier's life. He spoke of battle not as a mere incident of war, but as a realization of death for a noble cause. "A soldier's whole life," he wrote, "whether he will or not, is an

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1. Life and Letters, p. 8



enunciation of the greatest of religious truths, the voluntary sacrifice of one for the sake of many." <sup>1</sup> Saint Peter, in his opinion, was remarkable for personal courage and, therefore, "a soldier by nature: frank, free, generous, irascible." <sup>2</sup>

While his interest in the military is one of the key-notes of Robertson's life, two characteristics -- his overpowering sense of duty and a subtle self-mistrust combining early in his life, caused him to forego his plans for a military career. Upon his father's advice, he entered Oxford to prepare for the ministry.

This decision was not made suddenly, nor was it forced upon Robertson; rather, it was what might naturally be expected of one with his characteristics. His scrupulous honesty, devotion to truth, unaffected piety, his strong conception of the dignity of duty, and the impulse to self-sacrifice had long impressed Robertson's father, and, indeed, the boy's friends, of his suitability for the ministry.

When he entered Oxford the Tractarian Movement, or as he preferred to call it, "the Oxford delusion heresy," was at its height. The preaching and personality of John Henry Newman made a deep impression upon him. In one of his letters written from Heidelberg in 1846, he writes that he had "walked with Newman years ago to the brink of an awful precipice, and chosen rather to look upon it calmly, and know the worst of the secrets of the darkness, than recoil with Newman, in fear and tenderness, back to the infallibility of Romanism." <sup>3</sup> The immediate reaction of his contact

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1. Sermons: Second Series, p. 150

2. Sermons: Fourth Series, p. 223

3. Life and Letters, Vol. I., p. 110

with the Tractarians, however, was to drive him to an independent study of the New Testament<sup>1</sup> and the early Church Fathers.

After going through the Acts of the Apostles he wrote his father that even at that point, he was convinced that on the subject of Baptism the Tractarians were wrong. Besides the New Testament and the Church Fathers, Robertson at this period studied such books as: Calvin's Institutes, Ranke's History of the Popes, and Collier's History.

This study served to confirm his opinion as to the unsoundness of Anglo-Catholicism, a conviction he held throughout his life. And yet Robertson never ceased to read Newman's sermons with genuine pleasure and profit. Furthermore, there was no book for which he had a higher regard than Keble's Christian Year. In fact, Robertson's contact with the Tractarians led him to a larger catholicism which ultimately detached his conscience from the narrow system of Evangelical theology.

The Tractarian controversy, however, did not occupy all of Robertson's time while he was in Oxford. It would be difficult to conceive a more intensive course of study than that to which he gave himself. He attended lectures for sixteen hours in a week, dividing his time between natural history, geology, philosophy, and literature. Aristotle, Plato, Bishop Butler, and Johnathan Edwards "passed like the iron atoms of the blood into his mental constitution." Aristotle won a great influence over his intellect, and Plato never ceased to fascinate him. In his Lectures on Poetry delivered in Brighton, Robertson speaks of Plato as:

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1. During Robertson's residence in Oxford it was his habit to memorize certain verses of Scripture while dressing. In this way, before he left Oxford, he went through the English version twice and one and a half times through the Greek.



"One of the poets who, when his brain was throbbing, and his mind incapable of originating a thought, and his body worn and sore with exhaustion, made him know what it was to feel the jar of nerve gradually cease, and the darkness in which all life had robed itself to the imagination become light, discord pass into harmony, and physical exhaustion rise by degrees into the consciousness of power." 1

His impression of his total experience in Oxford is expressed in a letter to a young friend who was beginning his college career. After pointing out the need of having a definite goal in view, Robertson writes:

"At college I did what you are now going to do ... had no one to advise me otherwise; was rather encouraged in it by religious people, who are generally ... at least, the so-called religious .. the weakest of mankind; and I now feel I was utterly, mournfully, irreparably wrong. The theological controversy, questions of the day, politics, gleams and flashings of new paths of learning, led me at full speed for three years, modifying my plans perpetually. Now I would give two hundred pounds a year to have read on a bad plan, chosen for me, but steadily."

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In another letter dated May, 1838, he speaks of his Oxford years as follows:

"There is something excessively chilling in the donnishness of Oxford, which insinuates its unlovely spirit everywhere... lecture, chapel, pulpit, Union, conversation, retirement ... one feels inclined to say, 'Shall I ever love a human being again with anything warmer than a vegetable attachment?' It is just like the contents of my gigantic brown pitcher last winter .. though within eighteen inches of the fire all day, one globe of ice. Not very elegant or classical, you will say. Well then, Medusa's head, rockifying all that comes near it." 3

Such were his impressions of Oxford.

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1. Lectures, Addresses and Literary Remains, p. 73
  2. Life and Letters, Vol. I., p. 26
  3. Ibid, p. 36

## II

### WINCHESTER.

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Following his ordination in 1840, Robertson began his first ministry at Winchester. He entered upon his work with "a grave and awful sense of responsibility." He carried with him into the ministry the same spirit of self-sacrifice with which he would have entered a regiment of the Army. One who knew him well says:

"He took on himself the office of a minister with the keenest sense of responsibility and the most perfect devotion of will. He desired to emulate the spirit of St. Paul. I was not present when he was ordained, but I heard, from those who were, that his agitation was overpowering. When I saw him, the day after, he looked as if he had been through an illness. He seemed quite shattered." 2

A strain of asceticism runs through his ministry at Winchester. Believing that the only thing worth living for was to do God's work, and "to be conformed to Him in deed, and word, and thought, and to die really to the world," his entire life was systematized under a sense of religious devotion. He imposed upon himself severe restraint in food and sleep. He did not care to live long and seemed to take a strange pleasure in the thought of death. With the motto "if any man will follow me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily," Robertson compelled himself to rise early and for one year refrained from

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1. At Robertson's ordination the Bishop of Winchester, on presenting his papers to him, gave Robertson as his motto the text from which Mr. Nicholson, his future rector, had preached the Ordination sermon: "Endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ."



eating meat. Further evidence of his asceticism is seen in his habit of spiritual self-dissection. He mapped out his inward life and labelled his sins. He systematized his prayer life as follows: Sunday, parish and the outpouring of the Spirit; Monday, acts of devotion; Tuesday, spread of the gospel; Wednesday, Kingdom of Christ; Thursday, self-denial; Friday, special confession; Saturday, intercession.<sup>1</sup> Even the books in which he took a special interest during this period were consistent with this asceticism - Thomas A. Kempis' The Imitation of Christ, the biographies of Brainerd and Martyn. He also read and mastered Johnathan Edwards. In later years, Robertson expressed the view that while in Winchester he had developed his mind and character more truly and with more fidelity than anywhere else. While his rigorous life in Winchester may have been the logical reaction to his desultoriness at Oxford, the unnecessary strain which he placed upon his health is regrettable. His piety overshadowed his common sense. The total result of this episode of his life was broken health and a morbid sense of failure. Suffering intensely from the "growing pains" of the soul, he passed from his youthful enthusiasm into a state of despondency.

His theological position at this time may be described as Evangelical. There is no reason to suppose that up to this point Robertson questioned the verbal inspiration of the Bible or objected to the Substitutionary Theory of the Atonement, both of which he so vehemently rejected in his later life.

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1. Ibid. p. 61



III

A BRIEF INTERLUDE ON THE CONTINENT

After much persuasion on the part of friends, Robertson made a trip to the continent to regain his health. This interlude is of importance for three reasons. First, it did much to remedy his mental and physical condition. Going about on foot, he soon restored his physical energy, and the change of environment quickly alleviated his mood of sadness. Second, the spirit of freedom and the air of frankness with which he was able to discuss theological issues made this holiday significant. He plunged eagerly into the discussion of all subjects. In contrast to the generous and tolerant attitude which he later adopted, his discussions on this trip reveal an intense antagonism toward Roman Catholicism. In the third place, his trip is memorable because of his marriage in Geneva, Switzerland, to Helen, the daughter of Sir William Denys, a Northamptonshire Baronet.

IV

ROBERTSON'S YEARS IN CHELTENHAM.

The second period of Robertson's ministry opened in Cheltenham in the summer of 1842. Here he remained for approximately five years. Though he began his work in high spirits, he soon became depressed, believing his sermons to be unintelligible and feeling that his life was a failure.

To understand the transition which took place in Robertson's life during his residence here, it is necessary to give some attention to the special circumstances under which he preached. The irritating controversy over the "Tracts for the Times" was in full swing, and Cheltenham was a "hot bed" of professional religionists and a center of Evangelicalism. The slightest deviation from the approved shibboleths, especially on the part of a new clergyman, brought forth a barrage of criticism. To be accepted religiously and to pass the local test of orthodoxy, one was required to use certain phrases, approve certain doctrines, and possess certain feelings.

Little imagination is needed to understand Robertson's reaction to this situation. Opposed as he was to all sham, insincerity, and unreality, he found this atmosphere stifling. Mr. Brooke, his biographer, writes thus:

"His conception of Christianity, as the religion of just and loving tolerance, and of Christ, as the King of men through the power of meekness, made him draw back with horror from the violent and blind denunciation which the 'religious' agitators and the 'religious' papers of the extreme portions of the evangelical party indulged in under

the cloak of Christianity. 'They tell lies in the name of God; others tell them in the name of the devil: that is the only difference.'" 1

As early as 1843, Robertson's recoil from the intolerance and bigotry of the Cheltenham Evangelicals is evident. In a letter of that year, after disapproving Dr. Pusey's doctrine of the Eucharist and asserting his love for the Church of England, he describes the Evangelicals in these words:

"As to the state of the Evangelical clergy, I think it lamentable. I see sentiment instead of principle, and a miserable, mawkish religion superseding a state which was once healthy. Their adherents I love less than themselves, for they are but the copies of their faults in a larger edition. Like yourself, I stand nearly alone, a theological Ishmael. The Tractarians despise me, and the Evangelicals somewhat loudly express their doubts of me." 2

Robertson was so repulsed by the artificial character of these religionists, so pained by the great gulf between the doctrine they professed and the life they lived, that, as a precautionary measure, he gave up reading all books of a devotional character for fear he, too, should be guilty of feeling without acting.

In order to bring out his best thought, Robertson required the stimulus of friendship, the clash of opinions, a sympathetic understanding, the warmth of affection, and the reciprocity of thought.

During his ministry at Cheltenham, two of his friendships were outstanding. The first was that of his rector, the Reverend Archibald Boyd. Under the impulse of this friendship the entire character of his sermons was changed. In Winchester it was Robertson's

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1. Life and Letters: Vol. I, p. 100.

2. Ibid: p. 101f



policy to write his sermons in one morning - generally Saturday morning - without special preparation. Under Mr. Boyd's influence, Robertson studied for his sermons on Thursday and Friday and wrote them carefully on Saturday. Not only did his sermons cease to be doctrinal, in the strict Evangelical sense of the word, but, without losing any of their genuine religious character, their intellectual level was raised. It was from the impulse of this friendship that Robertson's high standard of preaching was established. The testimony of a friend, writing of this period, bears witness to the high level of the sermons.

"I had taken a prejudice against him, through no fault of his, when it was my good fortune to hear him preach. At this time he had just become curate to Mr. Boyd. I was not merely struck, but startled by the sermon. The high order of thought, the large and clear conception, the breadth of view, the passion held in leash, the tremulously earnest tone, the utter forgetfulness of self in his subject, and the abundance of the heart out of which the mouth spake, made me feel that here, indeed, was one whom it would be well to miss no opportunity of hearing. From the first he swayed those minds which had any point of contact with his own." 1

The second friendship is important because it reflects the internal state of Robertson's mind. Of this friendship little is known (not even the name of the friend), and yet there is sufficient information to justify one in attaching to it great significance. His special friend was a gentleman who was well read in metaphysics and, like Robertson, was familiar with the development of German Idealism. The rising tide of intellectual doubt with which both had to contend, had drawn them together. The sincere wish of both was that truth should triumph.

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1. Life and Letters, p. 82

It is probable that the following letter, written from Heidelberg in October, 1846, was addressed to this friend, though the letter does not disclose the name of the addressee:

"I would not willingly conceal any part of my heart from you, yet I fear I could not intelligibly tell you all, though I can put it in very distinct English for myself. At least, set your mind at rest on one point. Whatever mental trials I may experience, you are not responsible for any. I have heard you state difficulties, but never argue for them; and the difficulties could not come upon my mind for the first time - of a man who had read theological and philosophical controversy - long before, with painful interest - a man, who, at different times, had lived in the atmosphere of thought in which Jonathan Edwards, Plato, Lucretius, Thomas Brown, Carlyle, Emerson, and Fichte lived....." 1.

Further evidence of the internal confusion in Robertson's life may be seen in the list of resolves composed in 1845. By these he hoped to retain his religious faith despite his doubts. He lists some twenty, the following are among the most illuminating: <sup>2</sup>

"To learn from every one.

"To believe in myself and the powers with which I am intrusted.

"To try to despise the principle of the day, 'every man his own trumpeter;' and to feel it a degradation to speak of my own doings, as a poor braggart.

"To endeavour to get over the adulterous-generation-habit of seeking a sign. I want a loud voice from Heaven to tell me a thing is wrong, whereas a little experience of its results is enough to prove that God is against it. It does not cohere with the everlasting laws of the universe.

"To listen to conscience, instead of, as Pilate did, to intellect.

"To fix my attention on Christ, rather than on the doctrine of Christ."

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1. Life and Letters, Vol. I, p. 110

2. Ibid, p. 93



In a letter written in the same year, Robertson elaborates upon his determination to fix his attention upon the person of Christ. Here one recognizes how central to his theology the humanity of Christ had become. This fact indicates clearly that he had moved far from the theological position of his Winchester ministry. He writes:<sup>1</sup>

"A most warm, affectionate, and unselfish friend was taken from me when God bereaved you. But I do feel that sympathy from man, in sorrow such as yours, is almost mockery. None can feel it, and, certainly, none can soothe it except the Man Christ Jesus, whose infinite bosom echoes back every throb of yours. To my own heart, that marvellous fact of God enduring Himself with a human soul of sympathy is the most precious, and the one I least could afford to part with of all the invigorating doctrines which everlasting truth contains. That Christ feels now what we feel ..our risen ascended Lord .. and that He can impart to us, in our fearful wrestlings, all the blessedness of His sympathy, is a truth which, to my soul, stands almost without a second."

During these years in Cheltenham in which he was "hewing out his own path of conviction," the books which he read indicate the ferment of his intellectual and spiritual life. Speaking of Carlyle's Past and Present, he said: "I have gained good and energy from that book."<sup>2</sup> In preparing for his addresses on the books of Samuel, it was not to the commentaries that Robertson turned, but to such books as Niebuhr's Rome, Guizot's work on civilization, and books on<sup>3</sup> political economy. Tennyson and Dante were his favorite poets. It was also during this period that he engaged in a close study of German literature and philosophy.

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1. Ibid, p. 94 f

2. Ibid, p. 91

3. Robertson memorized Dante's "Inferno." He also published An Analysis of Tennyson's "In Memoriam."

These circumstances, both the external and the internal, gradually detached him from his Evangelical moorings. As his doubts increased, it became painful for him to preach. At last his unimpeachable honesty and consistent logic forced upon him the realization that the system upon which he had founded his whole faith was false. From that time onward, he repudiated the fundamental doctrines of the Evangelicals. This was that awful moment when his soul discovered that the props upon which it had been resting were rotten to the core, and when but one conviction remained: "it must be right to do right." In this frame of mind he embarked upon those memorable months of agony and distress during which he "found himself" spiritually and intellectually. In September, 1846, Robertson again journeyed to the continent.

A SECOND CONTINENTAL INTERLUDE.

Robertson passed the darkest hours of his spiritual crisis during his wanderings in the mountain of the Tyrol. From time to time he engaged a jager to guide him in his chamois hunts, but for the most part he was alone.<sup>1</sup> He asked for no sympathy, preferring to consume his own smoke. Three years later in 1849, he said of these weeks in the Tyrol: "the soul collects its mightiest forces by being thrown in upon itself, and coerced solitude often matures the mental and moral character, marvelously."<sup>2</sup> That is exactly what happened in his own case. By the time he reached Heidelberg, after six weeks in the Tyrol, he had begun to rebuild the foundations of his faith, this time rooted in the fundamental certitude of duty. He gives an account of his progress in this regard in a letter from Heidelberg, October 24, 1846:<sup>3</sup>

"Here, in Germany," Robertson writes, "I have conversed much and freely on the points of difficulty ... and in the conviction that a treasure lies near me in German literature, I am digging away night and day... Indeed, I have already plunged into it, perhaps too suddenly, considering my rudimental acquaintance with the

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1. In spite of Robertson's professed love of loneliness, he shared the social life of the various lodges and inns at which he stopped. He drew about him the rough herdsmen of the Tyrol and he "enchanted the German counsellor." His time in Germany is also memorable for the many friends which he made while living in Heidelberg.
  2. Life and Letters: Vol. I, p. 274
  3. Life and Letters: Vol. I, p. 111



language. Some things I am certain of, and these are my Ursachen, which cannot be taken away from me. I have got so far as this. Moral goodness and moral beauty are realities, lying at the basis, and beneath all forms of the best religious expressions. They are no dream, and they are not mere utilitarian conveniences. That suspicion was an agony once. It is passing away. After finding littleness where I expected nobleness, and impurity where I thought there was spotlessness, again and again I despaired of the reality of goodness. But in all that struggle, I am thankful to say, the bewilderment never told upon my conduct. In the thickest darkness, I tried to keep my eye on nobleness and goodness, even when I suspected they were only Will-o'-the-Wisps."

During the nine weeks which Robertson spent in Heidelberg, he studied Goethe, Schiller, and Krause and got back something like calmness and health again. In Heidelberg he ministered with remarkable success to the English colony there. In fact, he was invited to become their regular pastor.<sup>1</sup> In a letter to his wife, he discusses this invitation:

"There is a congregation earnestly wishing me to remain, not from popular preaching, but because they think they are getting good spiritually and morally. Individuals among them have been roused, and say out plainly that they are anxious not to be deserted in this crisis of their mental history -- that Heidelberg would be no longer the same, in the event of their losing their weekly instruction. Is this a call from God or not? ... Now balance all these things together, and tell me what you think, and also what my father thinks."

Even though Robertson decided to return to England, this generous invitation of the English colony in Heidelberg

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1. Ibid. p. 133

bears witness to the fact that he had found himself for he preached with power and conviction. Since he had at one period in his "wanderings" questioned the wisdom of returning to the ministry, it is good to see his willingness, and, indeed (to a degree), his eagerness to discuss his future ministry. The time in Germany did him much good; he returned to England with an enlarged vision and a firm grasp upon the fundamental realities of religion. His religious character now possessed a strength which only he who has thoroughly tested his beliefs can possess. Robertson spoke of this fact to the working men of Brighton:<sup>1</sup>

"I appeal to the recollection of any man who has passed through that hour of agony, and stood upon the rock at last, the surges stilled below him, and the last cloud drifted from the sky above, with a faith, and hope, and trust no longer traditional, but of his own -- a trust which neither earth nor hell shall shake thenceforth for ever."

On a later visit to the English Lake country, Robertson again expressed his great joy in his re-discovery of faith. A companion pointing to the summit of Skiddaw, hidden from view by the mist, remarked: "I would not have my head, like that peak of the mountain, involved, as we see it now, in cloud, for all you could offer me." "I would," rejoined Robertson quickly, "for, by-and-by, the cloud and mist will roll away, and the sun will come down upon it in all his glory."<sup>2</sup> And so it was with Robertson. Left to explore its own resources, his soul had come forth

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1. Lectures, Addresses and Literary Remains, p. 50.

2. Life and Letters, Vol. I, p. 105.



triumphant, never again to be shattered by recurrent doubts.

Upon his return to England, he was assigned to St. Ebbe's Parish, Oxford. While his ministry in this church lasted for only two months, his preaching attracted attention from the first. After much persuasion he resigned this post and took up his duties in Trinity Chapel, Brighton.

VI

B R I G H T O N

At Brighton, Robertson's moral and intellectual powers reached their maturity. There was no uncertainty or doubt in his preaching. The intense zeal with which he set about his work literally consumed his physical energies. To him the Word of God "was like a fire in his bones." Feeling that his work would kill him within a few years, he performed his duties with a "throbbing brain and with nerves strung to their utmost tension." He determined to bring religion to bear upon the grave issues facing his generation. To him Christianity had been too much preached as theology, too little as a religion of principles; too much as a religion only for individuals, too little as a religion for nations and for the world. To bring the forces of religion to bear upon life was the aim of his preaching.

The goals in the form of resolutions, which Robertson set for himself, and by the achievement of which he hoped to cope with the personal difficulties likely to harass him, reveal the utter sincerity and courage with which he entered his work in

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Brighton. He writes:

- 1 - "I want two things - habit of order and de suite. I begin many things and re-begin, each time with greater disrelish and self-distrust. At last life will be a broken series of unfinished enterprises ... I think it will be wise at Brighton to go out little; and even to exercise self-denial in this .... My danger is excitability.... This makes me effeminate, irresolute, weak in character - led by circumstances, not bending them by strong will to my own plan and purpose. Therefore, I must seek calm in regular duty, avoiding desultory reading - desultory visits...

2. "Cultivate natural, not unnatural excellences..."
3. "Explanations are bad things... The character which cannot defend itself is not worth defending."
4. "My mind is difficult to get into activity... Therefore, in order to prepare for speaking, preaching, etc., it is good to take a stirring book, even if not directly touching upon the subject in hand. Love is all with me. Mental power comes from interest in a subject. What I have to set in motion is some grand notion --- such as duty, beauty, time in its rapid flight..."

Brighton provided him with all kinds of personal contacts and associations. In Winchester he had worked chiefly among the poorer classes. Cheltenham was a half-fashionable place of narrow interest and limited outlook. In Oxford, all the under-currents and cross-currents of British intellectual life could be felt. But in Brighton, he met with all classes: clergymen of varying shades of opinion, enthusiastic chartists, conservative and liberal politicians, rich and poor, educated and uneducated. Plunging into this stream of life, his sensitive character enabled him to understand and to appreciate the inner-life of each group. "My misfortune or happiness," he says, "is power of sympathy. I can feel with the Brahmin, the Pantheist, the Stoic, the Platonist, the Transcendentalist, perhaps the Epicurean ... I can suffer with the Tractarian, tenderly shrinking from the gulf blackening before him, as a frightened child runs back to its mother from the dark, afraid to be alone in the fearful loneliness; and I can agonize with the infidels, recoiling from the cowardice and false rest of superstition... I feel<sup>1</sup> them all at once."

We must agree with his judgment of himself. His sen-

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1. Ibid, p. 190



sitive temperament was at once the common source of his achievements and failures; it was both his power and his weakness. On the one hand, it enabled him to understand the most delicate feelings, but on the other hand, this sensitiveness so exaggerated and magnified the false judgments passed upon him that a state of actual pain ensued, hastening his death.

Viewed from one side only, Robertson's character appears to have been a series of detached and uncontrolled reactions produced by the slightest irritation. He was bizarre and volcanic. Lady Byron said his very calm was a hurricane. He cultivated his artistic talents and then despised them, at times his romantic instinct of self-sacrifice transcended all prudence. In his preaching there is both strong excitement and deep depression. His sensitive conscience unduly exaggerated every failure into a sin. In fact, self-consciousness reached such a point in Robertson's life that it was little less than a disease. This, however, is only half of the picture. He recognized and faced his limitations and problems. In one of his sermons, he speaks of self-consciousness in these words:

"We observe here a great truth of the evil of self-consciousness...He who can dwell on this and that symptom of his moral nature is already diseased. We are too much haunted by ourselves; we project the spectral shadow of ourselves on everything around us."

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At another time he said:

"There are persons melancholy by constitution in whom the tendency is incurable; you cannot exorcise the phantom of despondency. But it is something to know that it is a phantom, and not to treat it as a reality."

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1. Sermons: Fourth Series, p. 268

2. Sermons: Second Series, p. 75

It is to Robertson's credit that he was not defeated by the distracting aspects of his life and did not succumb to this "phantom of despondency." Through his devotion to Christ and his abiding conviction that he was here to perform the Will of God, he achieved sufficient unity in his life to rise above his personal limitations.

Despite his poetic nature, he was extremely practical. He knew the importance of action. The part he played in the formation of the Working Men's Institute of Brighton soon made him famous as a champion of the poor and of unpopular causes. When asked by the conservatives to help stem the tide of democracy, Robertson cried: "What has ever made democracy dangerous but conservatism? The French Revolution! Socialism! Why, men seem to forget that these things came out of Toryism, which forced the people into madness. What makes rivers and canals overflow --- the deep channel cut ever deeper, or the dam put across by wise people to stop them?"<sup>1</sup>

After a series of sermons to workingmen - particularly his sermon "The Message of the Church to Men of Wealth" - Robertson was charged with being a socialist and classed with Charles Kingsley and Frederick Denison Maurice. Robertson was never, in the strict sense of the word, a socialist. On this point, Maurice wrote to Robertson:

"I think if you do not object, that I will write a quiet letter to the Daily News, fully admitting their right to say anything they please of Christian Socialists; but, begging them, in common justice, not to confound you with us, as you never called yourself by any such name, and as your sermon was neither Socialist nor High Church in any ordinary



view of either epithet, but what they themselves would confess to be a liberal and manly utterance." 1

Other extracts from Robertson's letters further show that he was not affiliated with this group, even though he respected them and felt sympathy for some of the things they were doing:

"I sympathize deeply with Mr. Maurice. I do not agree with him entirely, either theologically or economically. But he is quite after my own heart in this, that he loves to find out the ground of truth on which an error rests, and to interpret what it blindly means, instead of damning it. He loves to see the soul of good, as Shakespeare says, in things evil. I desire to see the same; therefore I love him, and so far I am at one with him. I do not pledge myself to one of his opinions, and disagree with many. But he is every inch a man, a right noble one." 2

"...while bishops in Parliament defending the Church meant only bishops rising whenever the stipends of the Church were in danger, and sitting still when corn laws, or any other great measure affecting the numbers and food of the people, came into question. All these things, when I think of them, make me doubt whether Kingsley's theory has not a deep, deep, awful truth at bottom." 3

His purpose was not to destroy the socialistic doctrines, but rather to point out what he considered to be the underlying errors of the theory and to demonstrate that the truths contained in Socialism were Christian truths. He argued that Christianity was the common ground upon which all classes of society could meet.

Robertson was, in fact, uniquely qualified, both by his training in history and political economy and by his native endowments, for the role of mediator in this war between the

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1. Life and Letters, Vol I. p. 160

2. Life and Letters, Vol II. p. 9

3. Life and Letters, Vol II. p. 16



Aristocrats and the working classes. These qualifications<sup>1</sup> are strikingly set forth by Mr. Brooke, his biographer:

"Robertson was insinctively a Tory, but he was by conviction a Liberal. His early training at home, his reverence and his desire for a military career, cherished in him the flower of chivalrous obedience, and made him an enthusiastic royalist..... But though his tastes were with aristocracy, his principles were with democracy. His duty to race was stronger than his sympathy with a class. He, therefore, resolutely subordinated the latter to the former. He recoiled also from the vulgarity, the loud assertiveness and obtrusiveness of the mob; but he was, on the other hand, too just not to make allowance for the want of polite training and education. By a manly suppression, then, of his ultra-sensitiveness, he soon became capable of recognizing, beneath the rough exterior of the working-men, their nobility of character."

Great as was his success in this realm, it was not as a social reformer that Robertson made his most significant contribution. Rather, it is as a preacher that he has won his place among the immortals.

During the last year of his life the controversy and opposition which his views provoked reached their climax. As a result his health, which had never been too robust, was shattered. Accompanying this external agitation was an irritation of the brain, likely a tumor, from which he suffered intensely. With his health in this state, Robertson asked the Vicar of Brighton to appoint a Mr. Earnest Tower as assistant curate for Trinity Chapel. Mr. Wagner, the Vicar, refused on the ground of rumoured charges against Mr. Tower. After care-

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1. Ibid, p. 158f

ful investigation, Robertson was convinced that the charges were untrue and that to acquiesce in the Vicar's opinion would be to do a grave injustice to Mr. Tower.<sup>1</sup>

Robertson's devotion to truth in this case was typical of his entire life. The state of his health, aggravated by his mental distress, soon made it impossible for him to continue his work. He died before the controversy was settled.

Time has justified the enthusiasm and loyalty of the throngs which filled the pews of Trinity Chapel during Robertson's ministry. Certainly he was the greatest preacher of the nineteenth century, and of him it may be truly said that, "being dead, yet he speaketh." With his death, his real ministry began, for his sermons have been widely read and still today their message finds a response in the hearts of many. There is no record of the vast circulation which his sermons have had, but it has reached hundreds of thousands. As Ian Maclaren has written:<sup>2</sup>

"It is possible to mention sermons which have had a larger circulation -- as for instance Mr. Spurgeon's -- but none in our speech have had a wider range of readers and none have exercised a more profound influence. Scholars, artisans, young men, soldiers, merchants, sceptics, Catholics, French Protestants, Anglicans, Scots kirkmen, have all heard his message with gladness."

Such was the life and ministry of Robertson of Brighton, a nineteenth century saint, who did not seek to

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1. In a conversation with Dr. R. J. Campbell - one time incumbent of Trinity Chapel - I was told that subsequent investigation had shown that this most unfortunate controversy was due to a misunderstanding on the part of Mr. Wagner as well as Mr. Robertson.
  2. Introduction to People's Edition of the Sermons by F. W. Robertson, page xxxv.

to escape life but entered into the conflicts of the world with courage, fidelity, and faith which only the true soldier of the Cross possesses. Here was a religious genius in whose experience the words of the Master whom he served were abundantly verified: "if any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine."



### CHAPTER THREE

#### PRINCIPLES WHICH UNDERLIE ROBERTSON'S TEACHING

A few months before his death, Robertson set forth the following principles as those upon which his teaching had been based.

- I - "The establishment of positive truth, instead of the negative destruction of error."

On this principle, Robertson founded his teaching on controversial matters. He believed that merely to uproot error is not to make "converts to Christ, but only controversialists." Errors are like buoys which mark the spot where some precious cargo of truth has been swallowed up by the sea, and Robertson believed it his work to recover the lost truth. In his opinion, there is no widespread error which is not an exaggeration or perversion of truth.

His method, therefore, was to destroy error by planting truth by its side. This practice is in line with his belief that religion is not the scrupulous avoidance of evil, but rather the positive and unhampered pursuit of the good. Being convinced that "the majesty of truth needs other bulwarks than vulgar and cowardly vituperation" and that spasmodic violence is not to be confused with strength of conviction, he consistently pursued the policy of overcoming evil by good and error by truth. As he says:

"...it is an endless work to be uprooting weeds: plant the ground with wholesome vegetation, and then the juices which have otherwise fed rankness will pour themselves into a more vigorous growth; the dwindled weeds will be easily raked out then..... Plant truth, and error will pine away." 1

Perhaps the best illustrations of this principle are to be found in his sermon on "The Glory of the Virgin Mother," in which he examines the Roman Catholic doctrine of the adoration of the Virgin.

"What lies at the root of this ineradicable Virgin-worship? How comes it that out of so few scripture sentences about her...learned men and pious men could have developed..... or as it seems to us, tortured and twisted a doctrine of Divine honours to be paid Mary?... I believe the truth to be this. Before Christ the qualities honoured as Divine were peculiarly the virtues of the man: Courage - Wisdom - Truth - Strength. But Christ proclaimed the Divine nature of qualities entirely opposite: Meekness - Obedience - Affection - Purity. He said that the pure in heart should see God... Now observe these were all of the order of graces which are distinctively feminine. And it is the peculiar feature of Christianity that it exalts not strength nor intellect, but gentleness and lovingness, and Virgin purity... How were men to find expression for that idea?... Men think about qualities -- they worship persons. Worship must have a form. Gentleness and purity are words for a philosopher; but a man whose heart wants something to adore will find for himself a gentle one -- a pure one...."2

Having thus examined the source of error, he then set forth the truth which he believed could supplant the worship of the Virgin, namely, the perfect humanity of Jesus Christ in whom masculine and feminine characteristics are in perfect balance.

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1. Sermons; Third Series, p. 62
  2. Sermons: Second Series, p. 228f

The orthodox shouts of "no popery," so common in his day, underlined the wisdom of his positive approach to controversial matters.

II - "Truth is made up of two opposite propositions, and not found in a via-media between the two."

By this acute dialectic, similar to Hegel's, Robertson arrived at the truths with which he confronted errors. Believing that there is one truth underlying the various partial and opposing views which, by their very partiality and one-sidedness become falsehoods, his chief concern was to bring into light the essential and fundamental truth common to both interpretations. Thus, regardless of the form in which dogma was stated, he always asked: What does it really mean? This principle is illustrated on almost every page of his writing. For example, in defending the religious views of Wordsworth, he said:

"All grand truth is the statement of two opposites, not a via-media between them, nor either of them alone. I conceive Wordsworth to have held both: then personality of the Eternal Being, and also His diffusion through space. Now I cannot conceal my conviction that it is the vice of High Churchism in its tendency to exaggerate the former of these by localising Deity in acts, places, etc. It is the vice of Pantheism to hold the latter alone."

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As a mediator between employer and employee, a role for which he was uniquely equipped, he embraced the truth contained in the progressive spirit of socialism and liberalism, as well as that to be found in the conservative's position.



In dealing with a specific problem - the question of closing the shops at an earlier hour - Robertson claimed for the employer the right to the freedom from coercion and for the employees their right to free time for self-improvement.

Coming more specifically to his religious teaching, this principle is illustrated in his discussion of the Lord's Supper when he says:

"In opposition to the Dissenting view, it is Christ's body and blood received; in opposition to the Romanists' view, it is not Christ's body and blood to those who receive it unworthily. We do not go between the two. Each of these opposite statements of the Dissenter or of the Roman Catholic are truths, and we retain them. It is not merely bread and wine: it is, spiritually, Christ's body and blood: God present spiritually, not materially, to those who receive it worthily; i.e., to the faithful. It is not Christ's body and blood to those on whose feelings and conduct it does not tell." 1

A final illustration of this principle may be taken from the Introduction of his great sermon on Baptism:

"Wherever opposite views are held with warmth by religious-minded men, we may take for granted that there is some higher truth which embraces both. All high truth is the union of two contradictories. Thus predestination and free-will are opposites: and the truth does not lie between these two, but in a higher reconciling truth which leaves both truth. So with the opposing views of baptism. Men of equal spirituality are ready to sacrifice all to assets, or to deny, the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. And the truth, I believe, will be found, not in some middle, moderate, timid doctrine, which skilfully avoids extremes, but in a truth larger than either of these opposite views, which is the basis of both, and

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1. Life and Letters, Vol. II, p. 154

which really is that for which each party tenaciously clings to its own view, as to a matter of life and death." 1

According to Robertson, then, the via media, which to timid minds seems safe and judicious, is - in point of fact - unsatisfactory because it fails to embrace either the evils or the truths of opposing views. God's truth is boundless, and not (as he charged the Tractarians and Evangelicals with believing) "a pond which you can walk round and say, 'I hold the truth! What, all? - Yes, all; there it is, circumscribed, defined, proved, and you are an infidel if you do not think this pond of mine...quite large enough to be the immeasurable Gospel of the Lord of the universe.'" 2

III - "That spiritual truth is discerned by the spirit, instead of intellectually in propositions; and, therefore Truth should be taught suggestively, not dogmatically."

The highest truths, according to Robertson, are truths of poetry and must be felt, not proved. Thus, his exposition of doctrine is based upon the conviction that spiritual truth is discerned by the spirit -- not discovered by the intellect in formal propositions. For example, an act of charity, of unselfishness, or of self-denial, will reveal more of the love of God than the mastery of the greatest volumes ever produced on theology. The will to do must be the key to the knowledge of God. Religious certainty is available only to the man who

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1. Sermons: Second Series, p. 44

2. Life and Letters, Vol. II, p. 36f

lives in faithful obedience to the fundamental truths of the moral consciousness. There is a splendid passage in which he goes to the heart of this matter:

"The evidence of the sun is its light, and not the shadow on the dial...So Christ is divine to those who are of the truth. To some persons He is not the image of God. How will you prove that He is? Is it by arguing about miracles and prophecy? It is by discussion about the same reading of texts, of by requiring belief on the authority of the Church? No. It is by means of a right heart: it is by means of God's Spirit ruling in the heart. These, and these alone, will disclose Christ to man; for 'no man can say that Jesus is Lord, but by the Holy Ghost--they are spiritually discerned.'" 1

And so one discovers that his teaching is largely suggestive rather than dogmatic. He could say to his confirmation class: "...in this way, my young brethren, I have tried to deal with you. Not in creeds, nor even in the stiffness of the catechism, has truth been put before you. Rather has it been trusted to the impulses of the heart; on which, we believe God works more efficaciously than we can do." 2

This principle is discussed and illustrated more fully in the chapter "What Robertson Taught Concerning the Nature of Faith."

IV - "That belief in the Human Character of Christ must be antecedent to belief in His Divine origin."

Rather than make Christ's divinity the passkey to His amazing life, Robertson insisted that only by the acceptance

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1. Lectures on Corinthians, p. 304

2. Sermons: First Series, p. 49f



of the real humanity of Christ can we attain a true understanding of His person and His work. Commenting on this, he said:

"Comprehend that heart, containing all that was manliest and that was most womanly. Think what you will, but do not mistake Him, or else you will lose the one great certainty to which, in the midst of the darkest doubt, I never ceased to cling -- the entire symmetry and loveliness, and the unequalled nobleness of the humanity of the Son of Man.. Ask me any questions you will on this, for if there is one subject I have pondered over and believed in, it is the mind and heart of Jesus." 1

Moreover, he held that it is only as we understand Christ's humanity that our own becomes intelligible, for in a very real sense Christ was God's idea of our nature realized. Thus, for him, the Incarnation was not only the center of all history but it was also the "blossoming of Humanity." This emphasis in his teaching is given further treatment in subsequent chapters.

V - "That Christianity, as its teachers should, works from the inward to the outward, and not vice-versa."

This principle runs through all that Robertson taught, both by word and deed. His age was one in which party strife was rampant. It is, therefore, all the more significant that his emphasis was upon spiritual realities and man's relation to God rather than upon allegiance to a party or acceptance of the customary beliefs of the religious world. His object was to put man in touch with the Living God, and there leave him so that while absorbing the truth, the truth might absorb him.

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1. Life and Letters, Vol. I, p. 287

VI - "The soul of goodness in things evil."

By acting upon this final principle, Robertson did his great work as a peacemaker, for by it his estimate of men and his view of the world, of history, and of nature were determined. Like St. Thomas Aquinas, he believed that evil is always parasitic upon the good. Evil is not the absence of the good, but rather it is a perversion of the good, though not a total perversion. Evil can exist only so long as there is good in it. Thus, according to Robertson it is the part of Christianity to bring out the worth of that which is apparently mean, and the dignity of that which is apparently low. This principle, perhaps more than any other, produced his great faith in man and made him feel a grave sense of urgency to preach in order that the imperishable spark of divinity might be fanned into a glowing fire.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ROBERTSON'S APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS FAITH

#### THE MORAL ARGUMENT

In the first half of the nineteenth century, as in the eighteenth, the theologian drew his principles from the oracles of God as contained in the Holy Scripture and on these developed his theology as a deductive science. The critical philosopher, on the other hand, did not concern himself with the Bible. And so while the theologian engaged in systematizing "revealed" religion, the critical philosopher explored "natural" religion.

By the middle of the century, men of religious faith were forced to re-examine the foundations of their beliefs. The heady rationalism of the advancing tide of historical criticism was in painful conflict with the stiff obscurantism of an unyielding orthodoxy. To Robertson this religious controversy was nothing less than conflict "between two great extreme parties. Those who believe everything, and those who believe nothing: the disciples of credulity, and the disciples of scepticism."<sup>1</sup> To him, both views were equally unsatisfactory. Unable to accept the rationalist's interpretation of religion as a body of metaphysical doctrines, he was likewise unable to accept the self-sufficiency of the authoritarians in their attempt to reduce the priceless treasures of religious faith to

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1. Sermons: Second Series, p. 95.



to a few well defined formulas.

Refusing both to stifle his doubts or to take refuge in an unintelligent surrender to authority, Robertson sought still a third approach to religious faith.

After months filled with agony of body and soul he achieved a conviction which became the foundation of his religious faith: "It is right to do right." This bed-rock belief alone remained during the long months of his spiritual crisis, and on this foundation he rebuilt his faith.

Speaking to the Workingmen's Institute on the question of the introduction of skeptical publications into the library, he reveals his own personal turmoil and the conviction which proved his salvation. No more important passage in all his writings, both for biographical interest and as a key to his view of the nature of faith, can be found. Said Robertson:

"It is an awful moment when the soul begins to find that the props on which it has blindly rested so long are, many of them, rotten, and begins to suspect them all; when it begins to feel the nothingness of many of the traditionary opinions which have been received with implicit confidence, and in that horrible insecurity begins also to doubt whether there be anything to believe at all. It is an awful hour -- let him who has passed through it say how awful -- when this life has lost its meaning, and seems shrivelled into a span; when the grave appears to be the end of all, human goodness nothing but a name, and the sky above this universe a dead expanse, black with the void from which God Himself has disappeared. In that fearful loneliness of spirit, when those who should have been his friends and counsellors only frown upon his misgivings, and profanely bid him stifle doubts, which for aught he knows may arise from the fountain of truth itself; to extinguish, as a glare from hell, that which for aught he knows may be light from heaven, and everything seems wrapped in hideous uncertainty, I know but one way in which a man may come forth from his agony scathless;

it is by holding fast to those things which are certain still -- the grand, simple landmarks of morality. In the darkest hour through which a human soul can pass, whatever else is doubtful, that at least is certain. If there be no God, and no future state, yet, even then, it is better to be generous than selfish, better to be chaste than licentious, better to be true than false, better to be brave than to be a coward. Blessed beyond all earthly blessedness is the man who, in the tempestuous darkness of the soul, has dared to hold fast to these venerable landmarks." 1

Through days of bitter experience and spiritual crisis this was his saving discovery: that faith arises in the context of duty and goodness, not simply through the "cultivated understanding"; that moral certainty is logically prior to religious faith, not the result of a narrow Biblicism which attempts to build religious faith upon the authority of the Bible, validated by miracles which lays down certain rules of evidence and says, "Behold our credentials: we call upon you to believe our Christianity." 2 In the soil of duty lies the germ from which religious faith grows.

Turning from his own life, he discovers that such a way of salvation was offered by our Lord, Himself.

"This was Christ's rule: 'If any man will do His will...' A blessed rule: a plain and simple rule. Here we are in a world of mystery, where all is difficult, and very much dark -- where a hundred jarring creeds declare themselves to be The Truth, and all are plausible. How shall a man decide? Let him do the right that lies before him: much is uncertain -- somethings at least are clear. Whatever else may be wrong, it must be right to be pure, -- to be just and tender, and merciful and honest. It must be right to love, and to deny one's-self. Let him do the Will of God,

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1. Lectures, Addresses and Literary Remains, p. 49
  2. Sermons: Second Series, p. 42



and he shall know. Observe -- men begin the other way. They say, If I could but believe, then I would make my life true: if I could but be sure what is truth, then I would set to work to live in earnest. No -- God says, Act -- make the life true, and then you will be able to believe. Live in earnest, and you will know the answer to: 'What is Truth?'" 1

His own salvation having been secured by holding fast to the "grand, simple landmarks of morality," he takes the position that, apart from such moral experiences he sees no hope for man's religious life at all. His unwavering support of the moral approach to religious faith is shown by the following passage:

"St. Paul speaks of a maxim among the Corinthians, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.' They excused their voluptuousness on the ground of its consistency with their sceptical creed. Life was short. Death came tomorrow. There was no here-after. Therefore it was quite consistent to live for pleasure. But who does not see that the creed was the result, and not the cause of the life? Who does not see that first they ate and drank, and then believed tomorrow we die? 'Getting and spending we lay waste our powers.' Eating and drinking we lose sight of the life to come. When the immortal is overborne and smothered in the life of the flesh, how can men believe in life to come? Then disbelieving, they mistook the cause for the effect. Their moral habits and creed were in perfect consistency: yet it was the life that formed the creed, not the creed that formed the life. Because they were sensualists, immortality had become incredible." 2

Again, he preached:

"It is idle to look into the materialism of man for the Revelation of his immortality; or to examine the morbid anatomy of the body to find the rule of Right. If a man go to the eternal world with convictions of Eternity, the Resurrection, God, already in his spirit, he will find abundant corroborations of that which he already believes. But if God's existence be not thrilling every fibre

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1. Sermons: First Series, p. 302f

2. Sermons: Second Series, p. 98f



of his heart, if the Immortal be not already in him as the proof of the Resurrection, if the law of Duty be not stamped upon his soul as an Eternal Truth, unquestionable, a thing that must be obeyed, quite separately from all considerations of punishment or impunity, science will never reveal these - observation pries in vain - the physician comes away from the laboratory an infidel. Eye hath not seen the truths which are clear enough to Love and to the Spirit." 1

Robertson is not quite sure just how far he should carry this necessary relation between religion and the good life. In the following passage he indicates that they are not identical -- that morality is rather the ground from which religion springs, and without which religious faith can never grow.

"Morality," he writes, "is not religion, but it is the best soil on which religion grows. He who lives an honest, sincere, honorable life, and has strong preceptions of moral right and moral wrong, may not have reached the highest stages of spirituality; he may 'know only the baptism of John;' he may aim as yet at nothing higher than doing his duty well, 'accusing no man falsely, being content with his wages,' giving one coat out of two to the poor and yet that man, with scanty theology and small spiritual experience, may be a real 'disciple' in the school of Christ, and one of the children of the Highest." 2

In still another sermon, however, he identifies religion and goodness, equating them with these words:

"He (Christ) proclaimed the identity between religion and goodness. He distinguished religion from correct views, accurate religious observances, and even from devout feelings. He said that to be religious is to be good. 'Blessed are the pure in heart...Blessed are the merciful...Blessed are the meek.' Justice, mercy, truth -- these He proclaimed as the real righteousness of God." 3

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1. Sermons, First Series, p. 6
  2. Sermons, Fourth Series, p. 149
  3. Sermons, Second Series, p. 213

In a later sermon he preached:

"Religion is goodness. To love God and to love man is Christianity; all else is only husk and shell."

Here is the very heart of the religious thought of Robertson of Brighton that God is personally revealed to the life of man by the living of the good life.

He was, however, far more than a teacher of ethics. Moral life is not a self-explanatory phenomenon in the organization of things. Moral life inevitably leads on to faith in God.

In an address delivered to the members of the Working Men's Institute in Brighton, he said:

"These are men always talking of rights, and never of duties; I do not expect that they should believe in God, nor could I prove God to such. But let a man once feel the law of duty in his soul -- let him feel within him as with the articulate distinctness of a living Voice, the Absolute Imperative, 'Thou shalt,' and 'Thou shalt not' - let him feel that the only hell is the hell of doing wrong, and if that man does not believe in God, all history is false. Brother men, the man who tries to discover a God outside of him, instead of within, is doing just like him who endeavors to find out the place of the rainbow by hunting for it. The place of the rainbow depends upon your standing point; and I say that the conviction of the being and character of a God depends upon your moral standing point. To believe in God, is simply the most difficult thing in the world. You must be pure before you can believe in purity; generous, before you can believe in unselfishness. In all moral truth, what you are, that is the condition of your belief. Only to him in whom infinite aspirations stir, can an Infinite One be proved." 1

Only to those who are aware of the direct confrontation with God, in whom infinite aspirations are known for what they truly are - "the beckonings of God," can God be proved. To see God one must first be like him, must have the witness within.



For all human experiences of love and righteousness call us further to the greater and fuller love of God and His goodness:

"The love of God is the love of man expanded and purified. It is a deep truth that we cannot begin with loving God, we must begin with loving man. It is an awful command, 'Thou shalt love the Lord Thy God with all thy heart and soul and mind.' It is awful and impossible at first. Interrogate the child's conscience, he does not love God supremely; he loves his mother, and his sister, and his brother more. Now this is God's plan....Our special human affectations are given us to expand into a diviner Charity... They become more pure, less selfish. Love was given, encouraged, sanctioned, chiefly for this end -- that self might be annulled....It is not merely love of goodness, but love of goodness concentrated on the Good One. Not merely the love of man, but the love of man expanded into the love of Him, of Whom all that we have seen of gentle and lovely, of true and tended, of honourable and bright in human character, are but the shadows and the broken imperfect lights." 1

Mr. Robertson realized the many problems which his interpretation of religious faith must meet and from time to time he dealt with them. For example, there was the problem of the content of goodness. How can we preach that our salvation consists in the obedience of the Moral Ought, when we are continually under the skepticism of relative knowledge? In the first series of his sermons, he alludes to the difficulty and suggests a general solution. In his sermon on Zaccheus, he says:

"The standard of right and wrong is eternal in the heavens - unchangeably one and the same. But here on earth it is perpetually variable - it is one in one age or nation, another in another. Every profession has its conventional morality, current nowhere else. That which is permitted by the peculiar standard of truth



acknowledged at the bar, is falsehood among plain men - that which would be reckoned in the army purity and tenderness, would be elsewhere licentiousness and cruelty. There is a parliamentary honour quite distinct from honour between man and man. Trade has its honesty: which rightly is fraud. And in all these cases the temptation is to live content with the standard of a man's own profession or society; and this is the real difference between the worldly man and the religious man. He is the worldling who lives below that standard, and no higher - he is the servant of God who lives above his age." 1

In later sermons and in his "Lecture on the Corinthians," he finds the answer in the absolute authority of conscience over man's duty:

"Guilt is contracted by the soul, in so far as it sins against and transgresses the law of God by doing that which it believes to be wrong: not so much what is wrong as what appears to it to be wrong." 2

The following rather lengthy quotation illustrates even more clearly what he has in mind:

"The principle laid down by the Apostle Paul is this:- A man will be judged, not by the abstract law of God, not by the rule of absolute right, but much rather by the relative law of conscience. This he states most distinctly - looking at the question on both sides. That which seems to a man to be right is, in a certain sense, right to him, and that which seems to a man to be wrong, in a certain sense is wrong to him. For example: he says, in his Epistle to the Romans that 'sin is not imputed when there is no law:' in other words, if a man does not really know a thing to be wrong, there is a sense in which, if not right to him, it ceases to be so wrong as it would otherwise be. With respect to the other of these sides, however, the case is still more distinct and plain. The Apostle says... there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. In other words, whatever may

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1. Sermons, Series One - p. 73
  2. Sermons, Third Series, p. 199

be the abstract merits of the question -- however in God's jurisprudence any particular act may stand - to you, thinking it to be wrong, it manifestly is wrong, and your conscience will gather round it a stain of guilt, if you do it... It is a matter of less importance that a man should state true views, than that he should state views truly... true to the light within, true to God, true to truth as God had revealed it to his soul... Do what seems to you to be right: it is only so that you will at last learn by the grace of God to see clearly what is right." 1

Robertson is thus definitely at one with the theologians who find in the moral argument the surest and most reasonable approach to religious faith. But because his theology is more the reduction of his own moral experience than it is the logic of a purely disinterested mind, his position preserves a warmth which is lacking in many kindred interpretations. It loses something of logical consistence in the process, but it never ceases to breathe the conviction of the believers whose soul has been touched by the "power of God unto salvation."

1. Lectures on the Epistles to the Corinthians, p. 139f

CHAPTER FIVE

WHAT ROBERTSON TAUGHT CONCERNING OUR KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Mr. Robertson saw in the material world sound basis for belief in the existence of God. "The sounds and sights of this lovely world are but the drapery of the robe in which the Invisible clothed Himself."<sup>1</sup> God exists as the Creator of things. "God's character, nay God Himself, to us would be nothing if it were not for the creation which is the great symbol and sacrament of His presence....If there were no material witness of His being, God would be to us as good as lost. The Creation gives us God: forever real in Himself, by Creation He becomes a Fact to us."<sup>2</sup> It is not chance nor fate, which sits at the wheel of this world's revolutions. It is not fortuitous concourse of atoms which massed themselves into a world of beauty. It was no accidental train of circumstances which has brought the human race to their present state. It was a living God. Not to believe in God would be the Reductio ad Absurdum of all reason:

"If in this world of order there be no One in whose bosom that order is centred, and of whose Being it is the expression: in this world of manifold contrivance, no Personal Affection which gave to the skies their trembling tenderness, and to the snow its purity: then order, affection, contrivance, wisdom, are only horrible abstractions, and we are in the dreary universe alone." <sup>3</sup>

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1. Sermons: Second Series, p. 147
  2. Sermons: Second Series, p. 67
  3. Sermons: Second Series, p. 108



Moreover, God is revealed by the whole of His creation. In the orderliness of the universe, Robertson saw indications of creative Mind. Up to a point he agrees with Paley - design implies a designer, but he does not accept Paley's famous illustration. God is not like the watchmaker, who, having finished his creation, separates himself from it, ending all relationships with the created object. God is not divorced from His creation. God is in the world - He is the law of its being, the spirit of its progress. Not only is God immanent in creation, but all of God is everywhere.

"Not only is God everywhere, but all of God is in every point. Not His wisdom here, and His goodness there: the whole truth may be read, if we had eyes, and heart, and time enough, in the laws of a daisy's growth. God's beauty, His Love, His Unity: nay, if you observe how each atom exists not for itself alone, but for the sake of every other atom in the universe, in that atom or daisy you may read the law of the Cross itself." 1

On first thought one is surprised to discover Robertson attaching such importance to nature as a clue. In one of his early sermons at Brighton he said: "it is in vain that we ransack the world for probable evidences of God and hypotheses of His existence." 2 And yet such an approach to the subject is in no way inconsistent with his general philosophy. Central to all Robertson's thought is the conviction that faith arises in the context of duty, that there can be no genuine belief in

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1. Sermons: Second Series, p. 119

2. Sermons: First Series, p. 6



God apart from the "simple landmarks of morality." With this basic conviction his preaching was always in agreement. When one who has been obedient to the law of duty directs his attention to the material world, he finds abundant evidence of God's existence. Only the failure to observe fundamental moral principles destroys the reflection of God in the world.

"What men do is this:- They put the quicksilver of their selfishness behind the glass, and so it becomes not the transparent medium through which God shines, but the dead opaque which reflects back themselves...." 1

If, on the other hand, the astronomer is humble in spirit and free from the pride of intellect, he will discover a First Cause in his study of the law of motion; the surgeon, seeing the exquisite beauty of design in the human anatomy, will worship the God who orders all being, and the philosopher, recognizing the influence of the spirit upon the laws of mind, will acknowledge the Eternal Source of all truth. The pride of intellect shuts God out from the soul and an awful ignorance of God remains.

God's true nature, Robertson deduces from several sources of experience. First of all, he gains certain information from the nature of the world; as given in the Mosaic account of the creation:

"The Mosaic account of the creation established these principles: 1. That the universe as it exists now is different from the universe as it existed once; in other words, things are not as they were. 2. That the creation of the world

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1. Sermons: Second Series, p. 148

was not the work of many gods but of One.  
3. That it was a Person that effected this vast work and not some law of the universe gradually educing all things from a power that was inherent in matter. 4. Respecting the character of the Creator the Israelites were taught that He had formed all things good; and here we have the foundation of all morality, the eternal difference between right and wrong which existed in God before the world was, which God could never change, and in obedience to which He created all things, for He beheld His universe and pronounced it very good." 1

Our own human experience also contributes to our knowledge of the nature of God. At this point Robertson is influenced by Saint Thomas Aquinas' Via Negatina. According to this view, we have no direct knowledge of God, we can affirm His existence but we can make only negative statements about His nature. Similarly, Robertson taught that we can know God's nature only by contrast. Tossed about in this life by unholy passions, we can know the nature of God only relatively. Our knowledge of God's holiness comes from our knowledge of unholiness; our knowledge of His purity from our knowledge of impurity. We know what injustice is and we are convinced that God is not that. From all that is wrong and evil God is forever separate. We arrive at our knowledge of what God is by our knowledge of what He is not:

"The chief knowledge we have of God's holiness comes from our acquaintance with unholiness. We know what impurity is -- God is not that. We know what injustice is - God is not that. We know what restlessness, and guilt, and passion are, and deceitfulness, and pride and waywardness --



all these we know. God is one of these. And this is our chief acquaintance with His character. We know what God is not. We scarcely can be said to know, that is to feel what God is. And therefore, this is implied in the very name of holiness. Holiness in the Jewish sense means separateness. From all that is wrong, and mean, and base, our God is forever separate." 1

Robertson did not believe, however, that the goodness of God is in kind totally different from man's goodness. He had too much faith in human nature to deny that a good man is more like God than is an evil man. God's nature resembles the nature of man. Love in God is not a mere figure of speech, for God has the same nature of which man has but the germ. Divine anger in God is different from human anger only in the respect that divine anger is divested of emotions. In his sermon "Christianity and Hindooism," Robertson preached:

"When we look at God as revealed in Jesus Christ, He appears to us as having a mind like ours; the ideas of number, of right and wrong, of sanctity, are to God precisely what they are to man. Conceive a mind without these, and it may be a high and lofty one, but, there can be no communion with it." 2

In the life and character of Jesus Christ, Robertson sees the truest of all revelations of God, for there he finds the reason why men can know God. God and men have qualities in common, for God made man in his own image. As a child and a father speak the same language, though the child's language is limited and his understanding of the speech primitive, yet father and child mean the same things in essence, if not in degree, so God and man mean the same moral values by the terms

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1. Sermons: Third Series, p. 235

2. Sermons: Fourth Series, p. 265

they use, though in perfect and imperfect forms respectively.

The life of Christ demonstrates this grand and important truth.

"It is this, if I may venture to so express myself - the truth of the Human Heart of God. We think of God as a Spirit, infinitely removed from and unlike the creatures He had made. But the truth is, man resembles God: all spirits, all minds are of the same family. The Father bears a likeness to the Son whom He has created. The mind of God is similar to the mind of man. Love does not mean one thing in man and another thing in God. Holiness, Justice, Pity, Tenderness -- these are in the Eternal the same in kind which they are in the Finite Being. The present Manhood of Christ conveys this deeply important truth, that the Divine Hearts is human in its sympathies."<sup>1</sup>

If to say that "man resembles God -- all spirits, all minds, are of the same family" is anthropomorphism, Robertson would willingly accept the charge for "God is Spirit," and in no sense like unto man in form. This he states clearly in one of his first sermons:

"God will never be visible - nor will His blessedness. He has no form. The pure in heart will see him, but never with the eye; only in the same way, but in a different degree, that they see him now. In the anticipated Vision of the Eternal, what do you expect to see? A shape? Hues? You will never behold God. Eye hath not seen, and never shall see in finite form, the Infinite One, nor the Infinite of feeling or of Truth."<sup>2</sup>

But again, he finds that his interest is chiefly in the moral nature of God. And, applied to God, the moral argument finds in Him and in His creation the all - comprehensive-

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1. Sermons, First Series, p. 101

2. Sermons, First Series, p. 5



of Divine Law. So certain is he that Right is eternally Right that he opposes the Calvinistic doctrine of the Sovereign Will of God with the Nominalist assumption that Right is not of the Will, but of the very Nature of God. Divine law, therefore, is absolutely unchangeable. In the Old Testament story of Balaam, he finds a vivid illustration of this point:

"What Balaam was doing in these parables, and enchantments, and sacrifices, was simply purchasing an indulgence to sin; in other words, it was an attempt to make the Eternal Mind change. What was wanting for Balaam to feel was his - God cannot change. What he did feel was this - God will not change. There are many writers who teach that this and that is right because God has willed it. All discussion is cut short by the reply, God has determined it, therefore it is right. Now there is exceeding danger in this mode of thought, for a thing is not right because God has willed it, but God wills it because it is right. It is in this tone the Bible always speaks. Never, except in one obscure passage, does the Bible seem to refer right and wrong to the sovereignty of God, and declare it to be a matter of Will: never does it imply that if He so chose, He could reverse evil and good. It says, 'Is not my way equal? are not your ways unequal?' 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' was Abraham's exclamation in a kind of hideous doubt whether the Creator might not be on the eve of doing injustice. So the Bible justifies the ways of God to man. But it could not do so unless it admitted Eternal Laws, with which no will can interfere. Nay, more, see what ensues from this mode of thought. If Right is right because God wills it, then if God chose, He could make injustice, and cruelty, and lying to be right. This is exactly what Balaam thought. If God could but be prevailed on to hate Israel, then for him to curse them would be right." 1

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1. Sermons, Fourth Series, p. 44f



Man, then, seeks to change the Will of God because of his reluctance to perform his duty. This "heathen idea of God" Robertson attributed to the Roman Catholic doctrine of indulgences and atonements. Rejecting such theological ethics for an ethical theology, he taught the complete and unalterable authority of the Law of God. He finds support for his conviction in a number of unusual channels. First, in the unity of creation, so that whoever investigates the universe, no matter what their chief interest may be, they will, if true, find no contradiction between their own discoveries and the discoveries of other investigators. In one passage, in which he surprisingly anticipates some of the arguments which raged a few years after his death, he sees no contradiction between the discoveries of modern science, and the Records of Moses. Rather, with different interests, and from widely divergent methods of investigation, they complement one another:

"The story of the Creation as told by Moses is one thing; as told by men of science it is another thing altogether. For the Bible is not a scientific work; it does not deal with hypotheses, nor with formal facts which are of time, and must necessarily vary, but it declares Eternal principles. It is not a revelation of the truths of Geology or Astronomy, but it is a revelation of the Character of God to us. And yet the spiritual principles declared by Moses are precisely those revealed by science. The first chapter of Genesis starts with the doctrine that the heavens and the earth, that light and darkness, were all created by One and the same God. Modern science day by day reveals more clearly the unity of design that prevades creation. Again, in Moses' account nothing is more remarkable than the principle of gradation on which he tells us the universe arose. And this is confirmed at every step by science. To

this the accumulated strata bear their witness, to this the organic remains testify continually. Not that first which is highest, but that which is lowest: First, the formless earth, then the green herb growing on the sides of the upraised mountains, then the lowest forms of animal existence, then, the highest types, then man, the last and noblest." 1

The absoluteness of law denies the possibility of chance in anything. In the two short passages below, he not only denies the possibilities of chance in material things, but even in the actions of human beings.

"Do you mean that some things are decreed and some are left to chance? That would make a strange, disconnected universe. The death of a worm, your death, its hour and moment, are all fixed, as much as His was. Fortuity, chance, contingency, are only words which express our ignorance of causes." 2

And again:

"By apparent accident, if there be such a thing in this world of God's, the daughter of Pharaoh came down to the river to wash, and, among the reeds, she saw the chest, in which lay the child." 3

Robertson's interpretation of miracles, coming as it did in the 19th century, is amazing, and yet it is perfectly consistent with his general philosophy of religion. To him, a miracle was an unusual but not unnatural operation of law.

"A miracle is commonly defined to be a contravention of the laws of nature. More properly speaking, it is only a higher operation of those same laws, in a form hitherto unseen. A miracle is perhaps no more a suspension or contradiction of the laws of

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1. Expository Lectures on Corinthians, p. 240

2. Sermons, Fourth Series, p. 28

3. Sermons, Fourth Series, p. 252



nature than a hurricane or a thunderstorm. They who first travelled to tropical latitudes came back with anecdotes of supernatural convulsions of the elements. In truth, it was only that they had never personally witnessed such effect: but the hurricane which swept the waves flat, and the lightning which illuminated all the heaven or played upon the bayonets or masts in lambent flames, were but effects of the very same laws of electricity and meteorology which were in operation at home." 1

It is God's changelessness which also gives prophecy its permanent value. For prophecy is not a forth-telling without relation to the condition of the prophets' own time, neither is it applicable to the current situation only. For law is operation upon principles, and upon persons, except as they are representatives of the principles. It operates upon all persons who represent the principle, whether the persons exist at the same time or with an interval of centuries between them.

"Prophecy is not merely a prediction of separate events, but, far rather, an announcement of principles; through the interpretation of the present, the prophets predicted the future; for the announcement of every principle connected with a fact is a prediction of all future events that shall occur under similar circumstances." 2

In one of his lectures on Genesis he develops this point still further:

"And this will help us to understand why all the prophecies centre in Jesus Christ. In Him alone meet all those perfections on which others were the partial and fragmentary representations. The prophecy, therefore, applied to them, is only partially true, because too grand for them. It represents them as perfect, which they were not, and only when they contain such perfection ensures the blessing to them. But Christ is that of which

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1. Sermons, Second Series, p. 39

2. Sermons, Fifth Series, p. 268



they were taken as representations, and to Him therefore belong the blessings. For instance the 53rd chapter of Isaiah was originally spoken of the Jewish nation, but only in a very limited sense could it be said of it that it had fulfilled the great idea of humanity -- self-sacrifice, or suffering whereby others are blessed. Only in the language of poetical hyperbole therefore is it true that Israel was rounded for our transgressions, and that Israel suffered as if the penalties of all nations were poured out on her. To make the prophecy reach its fulfilment, it must be applied to Him who was that which Israel's history only faintly shadowed." 1

To sum up,

~~Thus~~ God's law gives order and value to creation. Man is the son of God by obedience to the law of the universe. And God's law is righteous because it is the very expression of the nature of God Himself. Because this is true and because His nature is eternally the same, we can discover the content of the Moral Ought. It is revealed in the world around us, more fully in the experience of the human race, and completely in the life of Jesus Christ.

1. Notes on Genesis, Lecture XIV, p. 95f

CHAPTER SIX

WHAT ROBERTSON TAUGHT CONCERN

OUR KNOWLEDGE OF CHRIST

I

INCARNATION

Robertson interpreted the life, character and teaching of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, in terms of the moral purposes of God. Christ is not an interesting phenomenon to be studied. He is the Incarnation of the Moral Nature of the Eternal God, and as such takes his place in the universal scheme of things. For though Christ was fully human, He was not merely a man of unusual kind, an accident in the stream of humanity. He is a revelation of God of the most authoritative kind; He is the Son of God; He is the pre-existent Word.

"There are two statements made there. The first is this, 'The Son of God:' the second is this, 'The Son was - of God,' showing his derivation. And in that, brethren, we have one of the deepest and most blessed truths of revelation. The Unitarian maintains a divine Humanity -- a blessed, blessed truth. There is a truth more blessed still -- the Humanity of Deity. Before the world war, there was that in the mind of God which we may call the Humanity of His Divinity. It is called in Scripture the Word: the Son: The Form of God. It is in virtue of this that we have a right to attribute to Him our own feelings; it is in virtue of this that Scripture speaks of His wisdom, His justice, His love. Love in God is what love is in man; justice in God is what justice is in man; creative power in God is what creative power is in man; indignation in God is that which

indignation is in man; barring only this, that the one is emotional, but the other is calm, and pure, and everlastingly still. It is through this Humanity in the mind of God, if I may dare so to speak of Deity, that a revelation became possible to man. It was the Word that was made flesh; it was the Word that manifested Itself to man." 1

The Spirit of Christ is identical with the Spirit of Truth which has always existed in the hearts of men, and, since the dawn of human history, has been inspiring men to that degree of excellence by which some would understand Him when Christ did come into the world.

"The Eternal Word whispered in the souls of men before it spoke articulately aloud in the Incarnation. It was the Divine Thought before it became the Divine Expression. It was the Light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world, before It blazed into the Day-spring from on high which visited us. The Mind of Christ, the Spirit of the years yet future, blended itself with life before He came: for His words were the Eternal Verities of our Humanity. In all ages Love is the truth of life." 2

The person of Christ is the historic expression in human nature of the nature of God, a blending of Divinity with humanity - a revelation of both Deity and perfect Humanity. The highest expression of what God is and of what man may become.

"Christ is the realized idea of our Humanity. He is God's idea of man completed. There is every difference between the ideal and the actual - between what a man aims to be and what he is; a difference between the race as it is, and the race as it existed in God's creative idea when He pronounced it very good.

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1. Sermons: Third Series, p. 56
  2. Sermons: First Series, p. 312



"In Christ, therefore, God beholds Humanity; in Christ He sees perfected every one in whom Christ's spirit exists in germ. He to whom the possible is actual,... to whom what will be already is, sees all things present, gazes on the imperfect, and sees it in its perfection. Let me venture an illustration. He who has never seen the vegetable world except in Arctic regions, has but a poor idea of the majesty of vegetable life, - a microscopic red moss tint - ing the surface of the snow, a few stunted pines, and here and there perhaps a dwindled oak; but to the botanist who has seen the luxuriance of vegetation in its tropical magnificence, all that wretched scene presents another aspect; to him those dwarfs are the representatives of what might be, nay, what has been in a kindlier soil and a more genial climate; he fills up by his conception the miserable actuality presented by these shrubs, and attributes to them - imputes, that is, to them - the majesty of which the undeveloped germ exists already. Now, the difference between those trees seen in themselves, and seen in the conception of their nature's perfectness which has been previously realized, is the difference between man seen in himself and seen in Christ. We are feeble, dwarfish, stunted specimens of Humanity. Our best resolves are but withered branches, our holiest deeds unripe and blighted fruit; but to the Infinite Eye, who sees in the perfect One the type and assurance of that which shall be, this dwindled Humanity of ours is divine and glorious. Such are we in the sight of God the Father as is the very Son of God Himself." 1

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1. Lectures on the Epistles to the Corinthians. p. 334

## II

### THE ATONEMENT

But the most significant part of Christ's work was that of revealing the nature of God in His attitude toward Humanity. Here Robertson has no theological arguments to hide the glowing truth of the naked heart of God. In Christ he sees the infinite love of God for His children on earth; and that is too great a truth to be reduced to formal language, rational system, or orthodox definition. Robertson states it without reserve, leaving the congregation to digest it as they desire.

"What is the gospel? What was His gospel? Speculations or revelations concerning the Divine Nature? -- the Scheme of the atonement? - or of the incarnation? - or baptismal regeneration? Nay, but the Divine sympathy of the Divinest Man. The personal love of God, manifested in the face of Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup>

"The profound idea contained in the death of Christ is the duty of self-surrender... The death of Christ was a representation of the life of God. To me this is the profoundest of all truths, that the whole of the life of God is the sacrifice of self. God is Love; love is sacrifice -- to give rather than to receive... If the life of God were not such it would be a falsehood to say that God is Love, for even in our human nature that which seeks to enjoy all instead of giving all, is known by a very different name from that of love. All the life of God is a flow of this divine self-giving charity. Creation itself is sacrifice - the self-impartation of the divine Being."<sup>2</sup>

This glowing revelation of God's infinite love for His children is found not only in the teaching of our Lord,

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1. Sermon, First Series, p. 83  
2. Sermons, Third Series, p. 98f

but more particularly in His life. In the voluntariness of His sacrifice, God's love is revealed supremely.

"The life of blessedness, the life of love - the life of sacrifice - the life of God - are identical. All love is sacrifice - the giving of life and self for others. God's life is sacrifice - for the Father loves the Son as the Son loves the sheep for whom He gave His life .... Whoever will humbly ponder this will, I think, understand the Atonement better than all theology can teach him... How could the Father be satisfied with the death of Christ, unless He saw in the sacrifice mirrored His own love?... The pain of Christ gave God no pleasure -- only the love that was tested by pain -- the love of perfect obedience." 1

Moreover, Christ alone of all men that have lived was able to make such a sacrifice, for He alone was perfect before God. He was the one person who was not under condemnation. In any other man the sacrifice could not be as complete, for all men are under the penalty of the law. But He, who was not under condemnation, by making of His life a sacrifice for the sins of the world, made of that sacrifice a vicarious offering through which we may be accepted in His name. The following quotations are offered at length:

"All other notions of sacrifice are false. Whatsoever introduces the conception of vindictiveness or retaliation; whatever speaks of appeasing fury; whatever estimates the value of the Saviour's sacrifice by the 'penalty paid'; whatever differs from these notions of sacrifice contained in psalms and prophets, -- is borrowed from the bloody shambles of Heathenism, and not from Jewish altars.... This alone makes the worshipper perfect as pertaining to the conscience. He who can offer it in its entirety, He alone is the world's Atonement; He in whose heart the Law was, and Who alone of all mankind was content to do it, His

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1. Sermons, Second Series, p. 266f



Sacrifice alone can be the Sacrifice of humanity: He who through the Eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, He alone can give the Spirit which enables us to present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God." 1

"Vicarious sacrifice is the law of Being. It is a mysterious and fearful thing to observe how all God's universe is built upon this law, how it penetrates and prevades all Nature, so that if it were to cease, Nature would cease to exist....But in the redemption of our Humanity, a moment comes when that law is recognized as the will of God adopted consciously, and voluntarily obeyed as the law of man's existence. Then it is that man's true nobleness, his only possible blessedness, and his redemption from blind instincts and mere selfishness, begin. You may evade that law - you may succeed in living as Caiaphas did, sacrificing others, instead of yourself -- and men will call you wise and prudent, and respectable. But you are only a Caiaphas: - Redeemed you are not. Your proper Humanity has not begun." 2

Christ recognized the law of vicarious sacrifice and joyfully embraced it as the Law of His existence. It was the consciousness of His surrender and the voluntariness of the act which made it sacrifice. Had Christ been surprised by the stratagem of Caiaphas and dragged to His doom, He would have been a victim but not a sacrifice. It was the foresight of all the result of His opposition to the world's sin and His uncompromising battle against it which elevated His death to the dignity of a true sacrifice, -- a sacrifice for the world's sin. Christ came into collision with the world's evil, and He bore the penalty of that daring. He approached the whirling wheel, and was torn in pieces. It is the law which governs the conflict

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1. Sermons, Second Series, p. 144

2. Sermons, First Series, p. 138

with evil. Christ bore the penalty of others' sin. This was inescapable:

"The moral Laws of this universe are as immutable as God Himself. Law is the Being of God. God cannot alter those laws....Consider what Law is, and then the idea of bloody vengeance passes away altogether from the Sacrifice. It is not 'an eye for an eye'... It is the eternal impossibility of violating that law of the universe whereby penalty is annexed to transgression, and must fall, either laden with curse, or rich in blessing." 1

Thus the work of Christ was Atonement, the reconciling of God and men, or better, the bringing together of God and Humanity.

"God is reconciled to men for Christ's sake. Earnestly I insist that the Atonement is through Christ. God is reconciled to Humanity in Christ; then to us through Him; 'God was in Christ.' It was a Divine Humanity. To that Humanity God is reconciled: there could be no enmity between God and Christ: 'I and my Father are one.' To all those in whom Christ's Spirit is, God imputes the righteousness which is as yet only seminal, germinal: a seed, not a tree; a spring, not a river; an aspiration, not an attainment; a righteousness in faith, not a righteousness in works. It is not then, an actual righteousness, but an imputed righteousness. Hence we see what is meant by saying, 'reconciled or atoned through Christ.'" 2

Robertson did not mean that each man reconciles himself as Christ did, by being righteous; but that God views him favorably as partaking of that Humanity which has been once exhibited on earth a holy perfect humanity.

It is an atonement by "imputed righteousness," a righteousness which we shall imitate and make the law of our own until it becomes an actual righteousness to ourselves. And the way of righteousness is the way of the Cross.

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1. Sermons, First Series, p. 143  
2. Lectures on the Epistles to the Corinthians, p. 343



"The cross is the distinct announcement to us of that wonderful law which fills all life, that 'through much tribulation we must enter into the kingdom of heaven.' Perfection through suffering, that is the doctrine of the cross. There is love in that law. Trial is not the mark of an angry God; it is the evidence of deepest parental love." 1

Robertson's Christology is consistent with his main position. Moreover, he safeguards his arguments more effectively than do many followers of the Moral Argument today. For Robertson realized that the imitation of Christ as an ethic, and the person of Jesus as teacher, are not sufficient for the salvation of humanity. There is little similarity between Robertson's "Divine Humanity" and the conception of Christ as the world's Perfect Man. Robertson's Christ is "God of God, Light of Light; Very God of Very God; Begotten - not made; Being of one substance with the Father."

While steering clear of the magical tendencies of the theory of Blood Atonement, he saw that an Atonement was essential to the restoration of human dignity.

At the same time Robertson was developing his Christology, Horace Bushnell in America was formulating a similar interpretation of the Vicarious Sacrifice of Christ. Robertson's tremendous respect for the unchanging moral nature of God, of which Divine Law is the expression, saved him from many of the pitfalls common to many liberal interpretations of the work of Christ.

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1. Sermons: Fifth Series, p. 34



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

Robertson says very little upon this doctrine. He preached one sermon on the subject at Brighton. He attacks the Unitarian position in regard to the doctrine of Christ, nobly defending His deity. But there he stops. His position is quite orthodox, though not dogmatic. God the Father, God the Son, and undoubtedly God the Holy Ghost, but he does not elevate the redeeming and sanctifying aspects of God into equal position with the creative God. Undoubtedly Robertson believed that the doctrine of the Trinity held a definite truth, but as in the case of other subjects, what we actually possess is only the root-thought which he would have no doubt developed, had he lived longer.

The following passages reveal his orthodox views:

"The doctrine of the Trinity is the sum of all that knowledge which has as yet been gained by man. I say gained as yet. For we presume not to maintain that in the ages which are to come hereafter, our knowledge shall not be superseded by a higher knowledge; we presume not to say that in a state of existence future there shall not be given to the soul an intellectual conception of the Almighty, a vision of the Eternal, in comparison with whose brightness and clearness our present knowledge of the Trinity shall be as rudimentary and as childlike as the knowledge of the Christian." 1

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1. Sermons: Third Series, p. 43

"The doctrine of the Trinity is a metaphysical doctrine. It is a trinity -- a division of the mind of God. It is not three materials; it is three persons in a sense we shall explain by and by." 1

"In the present state a fourth you cannot add to these - Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier." 2

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1. Sermons, Third Series, p. 52
  2. Sermons, Third Series, p. 57

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE NATURE OF SIN

After the development of the Moral Argument and of the Doctrine of God, the problem of sin is the next most important subject to Robertson. He makes a number of statements concerning the nature of sin.

"The evil from which Christ's sanctification separates the soul, is that worst of evils -- properly speaking the only evil -- sin: revolt from God, disloyalty to conscience, tyranny of the passions, strife of our self-will in conflict with the loving Will of God." 1

"This is the very central principle of sin: properly speaking there is no other sin but selfishness. The agriculturist distinguishes between two sorts of roots: those which go deep down into the ground without dividing; and those which divide off into endless fibrils and shoots. Selfishness is like the latter kind; it is the great root of sin from which others branch out." 2

Robertson held that there was no such thing as chance in the affairs of the Universe. All is under law. Even the coming of Pharoah's daughter to the river and her discovery of the child Moses, he conceives to be in the all-determining hand of God. Still, he strangely concludes, that "sin is a voluntary act":

"Wicked works are voluntary deeds; they are not involuntary, but voluntary wrong. There is a vague way in which we sometimes speak of sin, in which it is possible for us to lose the idea of its guilt, and also to lose the idea of personal responsibility. We speak of sin

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1. Sermons: Second Series, p. 216  
2. Robertson, Notes on Genesis, p. 27



sometimes as if it were a foreign disease introduced into the constitution; an imputed guilt arising from an action not our own, but of our ancestors. It is never so that the Bible speaks of sin. It speaks of it as wicked works, voluntary deeds, voluntary acts; that you, a responsible individual, have done acts which are wrong, of the mind, the hand, the tongue."<sup>1</sup>

This seems to involve Robertson in a contradiction. In another sermon he attempts to escape from the dilemma in the following fashion:

"God does not predestinate men to fail. That is strikingly told in the history of Judas - 'From a ministry and apostleship Judas fell, that he might go to his own place.' The ministry and apostleship were that to which God had destined him. To work out that, was the destiny appointed to him, as truly as to any of the other apostles. He was called, elected to that. But when he refused to execute that mission, the very circumstances which, by God's decree, were leading him to blessedness, hurried him to ruin. Circumstances prepared by Eternal Love, became the destiny which conducted him to everlasting doom. He was a predestined man -- crushed by his Fate. But he went to his own place.' He had shaped his own destiny."<sup>2</sup>

But is this a possible position? If the will of God is complete even in the realm of human activity, is it possible, then, to go to "one's own place?" Then Pharaoh's daughter may not have discovered Moses after all, and thus the element of possibility does find a place in the scheme of things. It is not difficult to understand his predicament. On the one hand, the moral argument requires the absolute authority and

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1. Sermons, Fourth Series, p. 210
  2. Sermons, First Series, p. 18

unchangeability of the will of God, thus establishing the Imperative of the Good. But, on the other hand, the moral argument also demands the freedom of the human will, making moral choice possible.

Because God the Creator is also God the Good, it follows that sin was not created by Him and is, therefore, unnatural. This he holds is quite compatible with the teaching of Christ.

"The truest definition of evil is that which represents it as something contrary to nature: evil is evil, because it is unnatural; a vine which should bear olive berries, an eye to which blue seems yellow, would be diseased: an unnatural mother, an unnatural son, an unnatural act, are the strongest terms of condemnation. It is this view which Christianity gives of moral evil: the teaching of Christ was the recall of man to nature, not an infusion of something new into Humanity. Christ came to call out all the principles and powers of human nature, to restore the natural equilibrium of all our faculties; not to call us back to our own individual selfish nature, but to human nature as it is in God's ideal -- the perfect type which is to be realized in us. Christianity is the regeneration of our whole nature, not the destruction of one atom of it." 1

In a certain sense, therefore, he is not sure whether sin has any reality. Inevitable though it is, by his own admission: evil is but the shadow that inseparably accompanies good.

"Sin is not a real thing. It is rather the absence of a something, the will to do right. It is not a disease or taint, an actual substance projected into the constitution. It

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1. Sermons, Third Series, p. 10

is the absence of the spirit which orders and harmonizes the whole; so that what we mean when we say the natural man must sin inevitably, is this, that he has strong natural appetites, and that he has no bias from above to counteract those appetites; exactly as if a ship were deserted by her crew, and left on the bosom of the Atlantic with every sail set and the wind blowing. No one forces her to destruction - yet on the rocks she will surely go, just because there is no pilot at the helm. Such is the state of ordinary men. Temptation leads to fall. The gusts of instincts, which rightly guided, would have carried safely into port, dash them on the rocks. No one forces them to sin; but the spirit-pilot has left the helm. Sin, therefore, is not in the appetites, but in the absence of a controlling will." 1

"Good in this world cannot be done without evil. Evil is but the shadow that inseparably accompanies good. You may have a world without shadow; but it must be a world without light, a mere dim, twilight world." 2

Here again Robertson is open to serious question.

To claim that evil is not a reality is a philosophical statement which human experience does not support. True, Moral Argument will not allow the eternal reality of evil, unless it takes the offered escape of Dualism, but humanity has never been able to translate the ideal of evil as a shadow into empirical language. It is in these very difficult problems of freedom and the fact of evil that Robertson betrays himself. Had he lived longer, these are the gaps which might have been bridged by his careful thought.

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1. Sermons, First Series, p. 104f

2. Lectures, Addresses and Literary Remains, p. 24



But the preacher is on surer ground when he comes to the law of Penalty. God's laws are good, but he who mocks them by misuse shall fall. In several sermons he uses the phrase: "Sin and you will suffer."

"Say you that God is love? Oh! but look around this world. The aspect of things is stern; very stern. If they be ruled by love, it is a love which does not shrink from human agony. There is a law of infinite mercy here, but there is a law of boundless rigour too. Sin, and you will suffer - that law is not reversed. The young, and the gentle, and the tender, are inexorably subjected to it. We would shield them if we could: but there is that which says they shall not be shielded. They shall weep, and fade, and taste the mortal anguish, even as others. Carry that out into the next world, and you have 'wrath to come.'" 1

All penalty is not the same, however. There are two kinds of penalties. The one of caution and warning, the other of wrath. And though penalty is certain, forgiveness is sure for those who repent. Yet forgiveness does not overthrow the natural effects of one's sin. Law continues its causal series - it is the attitude of God to the sinner which is changed. Here again he emphasizes the unchangeability of Divine Law:

"Divine pardon does not interfere with the laws of the universe, for it is itself one of those laws. It is a law that penalty follows transgression. Forgiveness will not save from penalty; but it alters the feelings with which the penalty is accepted. Pain inflicted with a surgeon's knife for a man's good, is as keen as that which results from the knife of the torturer; but in the one case it is calmly borne, because remedial -

in the other it exasperates, because it is felt to be intended by malevolence. So with the difference between suffering which comes from a sin which we hope God has forgiven, and suffering which seems to fall hot from the hand of an angry God. It is a fearful truth, that so far as we know at least, the consequences of an act are connected with it indissolubly. Forgiveness does not arrest them; but by producing softness and grateful penitence, it transforms them into blessings." 1

The forgiveness of God acts upon the moral consequences of sin directly and immediately.

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1. Sermons, Third Series, p. 69

CHAPTER NINE

THE PROBLEM OF NATURAL EVIL

Robertson is most unsatisfactory in the little he has to say about Natural Evil. The one passage which mentions it either does not or refuses to see the issue.

"There is another thing which we must bear in mind, that there are certain evils which fall upon man, over which he has no control. They come as the result of circumstance over which he has no power whatsoever.....If the penalty comes as the consequence appointed by God Himself to follow certain sins, it is a natural punishment; but if it comes with no connection, it is then an arbitrary punishment. So, if a man educates his child ill and he turns out a bad man, there is a natural connection and penalty and the guilt. But if a man, pursuing his journey, is struck with lightning, there is no penalty there."



Of the last sentence, however, though it illustrates a tremendous problem, he has not a single word of explanation. Either it completely baffled him, or the arbitrariness of such an act did not arouse his moral indignation. The supposition might be that he regards inanimate nature as possessing neither moral nor immoral qualifications. And this is true. But if inanimate nature is motivated by the emanent Spirit of God acting as the law of nature, it seems that God would be in some measure responsible for catastrophies of nature which occur. Particularly is this true in the thinking of one, who with Robertson, holds that "fortuity, chance, and contingency are only words which express our ignorance of causes." Once again we are limited by the incompleteness of Robertson's work.

## CHAPTER TEN

### ROBERTSON'S THEORY OF IMMORTALITY

One would expect that Robertson's interest in immortality would be strong, and we are not disappointed. His sermons abound with references to the eternal life of man. And, of course, the subject is definitely influenced by his main argument of moral phenomenon.

First of all, he sees a possibility of belief in immortality by analogy with the variety and progressiveness of Nature. It seems impossible that God, who has created so many and so marvellous things on earth would bring all to a sudden end. Moreover, all this process culminates in the virtuous yearnings of the human heart for a fuller and more perfect existence. If this yearning be mere delusion, then it is impossible that God is good. Life becomes hideous mockery.

"No man, in a high mood, ever felt that this life was really all. No man, then, ever looked on life and was satisfied. No man ever looked at the world without hoping that a time is coming when that creation which is now groaning and travailling in bondage, shall be brought into the glorious liberty of the Son of God. No man ever looked upon our life, and felt that it was to remain always what it now is: he could not and would not believe that we are left here, till our mortality predominates, and then that the grave is all." 1

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1. Lectures on the Corinthians, Lecture XXXI, p. 235

Indeed, to disbelieve in immortality is to make foolishness of Christianity - more, to make of morality a ghastly crime. Robertson is speaking with the authority of one for whom the Christian life is not an easy thing when he states in his twenty-ninth lecture on St. Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians:

"Afterwards, by a reductio ad absurdum, he argues that if Christ be not risen, the whole question of right and wrong is decided in favour of wrong. St. Paul does not say, 'We are mistaken,' but he says, 'We are found liars.'

"Now in what does the absurdity of this consist? The Apostles must have been either good or bad men. If good, that they should have told this lie is incredible, for Christianity is to make men not false, but better, more holy, more humble, and more pure. If bad men, why did they sacrifice themselves for the cause of goodness? In suffering and in death, they witnessed to the truth which they taught; and it is a moral monstrosity that good men should die for what they believed to be a lie. It is a gross absurdity that men should bear indignity, woe and pain, if they did not believe that there would be an eternal life for which all this was a preparation.

"And again, if the soul be not immortal, Christian life, not merely apostolic devotedness, is 'a grand impertinence.' 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die,' was the motto and epitaph of Sardanapalus; and if this life be all, we defy you to disprove the wisdom of such reasoning. How many of the myriads of the human race would do right, for the sake of right, if they were only to live fifty years, and then die for evermore? Go to the sensualist, and tell him that a noble life is better than a base one, even for that time, and he will answer: 'I like pleasure better than virtue: you can do as you please; for me, I will wisely enjoy my time. It is merely a matter of taste. By taking away my hope of a resurrection, you have dwarfed good and evil, and



shortened their consequences. If I am only to live sixty or seventy years, there is no eternal right or wrong. By destroying the thought of immortality, I have lost the sense of the infinitude of evil, and the eternal nature of good." 1

It is inconceivable that Robertson's stern ethical life could stop with death.

But he does not use eternity as the place where the wicked shall finally be punished. He is convinced that the wicked are punished here.

"It is a common thing to hear sentimental wonderings about the unfairness of the distribution of things here. The unprincipled get on in life: the saints are kept back. The riches and rewards of life fall to the lot of the undeserving. The rich man has his good things, and Lazarus his evil things. Whereupon it is taken for granted that there must be a future life to make this fair: that if there were none, the constitution of this world would be unjust.

"But if you look into it, the balance is perfectly adjusted even here.....the religious tradesman complains that his honesty is a hindrance to his success: that the tide of customers pours into the doors of his less scrupulous neighbors in the same street, while he himself waits for hours idle. My brother! do you think that God is going to reward honour, integrity, high-mindedness, with this world's coin? Do you fancy that He will pay spiritual excellence with plenty of custom? Now, consider the price that man has paid for his success. Perhaps mental degradation and inward dishonour. His advertisements are all deceptive. His treatment of his workmen tyrannical; his cheap prices made possible by inferior articles. Sow that man's seed, and you will reap that man's harvest. Cheat, lie, advertise, be unscrupulous in your assertions, custom will come to you. But if the price is too dear, let him have his harvest, and take yours; yours is a clear conscience, a pure mind, rectitude within and without -- Will you part

with that for his? Then why do you complain? He has paid his price, you do not choose to pay it." 1

For Robertson the evidence of immortality is not to be found in the necessity of punishment, but rather in the necessity for the continuation of the good. Eternity is not a state we enter at death; it is a state the Christian begins on earth, and which only changes form and place at death. Men believe in eternity because they find it in the moral life here on earth. The following quotation is too important to be shortened:

"...They whose life is low and have lived as Joseph lived, just in proportion to their purity and their unselfishness, must believe it. They cannot but believe it. The eternal existence is already pulsing in their veins; the life of trust and high hope, and sublime longings after perfection, with which the decay of the frame has nothing at all to do....

"For what is our proof of immortality? Not the analogies of nature; the resurrection of nature from a winter grave, or the emancipation of the butterfly. Not even the testimony to the fact of risen dead; for who does not know how shadowy and unsubstantial these intellectual proofs become in unspiritual frames of mind? No, the life of the spirit is the evidence. Heaven begun is the living proof that makes the heaven to come credible. 'Christ in you is the hope of glory.' It is the eagle eye of faith which penetrates the grave, and sees far into the tranquil things of death. He alone can believe in immortality, who feels the resurrection in him already." 2

Heaven is the home of the combination of the good life and the state of blessedness. Undoubtedly, this whole section

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1. Sermons: First Series, p. 209.

2. Sermons: First Series, p. 318f



of Robertson's thought was influenced by Emanuel Kant, whose philosophy he studied closely while in Germany during the year 1846. Emphatically, he accepts the sentiment of the hymn: "I'm but a pilgrim here, Heaven is my home."

In a sermon, entitled, "John's Rebuke to Heron," he states:

"Once more we get from this subject the doctrine of a resurrection. John's life was hardness, his end was agony. That is frequently Christian life. Therefore, says the apostle, if there be no resurrection the Christian's choice is wrong; 'If in this life only we have hope in Christ, then are we of all men most miserable.' Christian life is not visible success - very often it is the apparent opposite of success. It is the resurrection of Christ working itself out in us; but it is very often the Cross of Christ imprinting itself on us very sharply. The highest prize which God has to give here is martyrdom. The highest style of life is the Baptist's - heroic, enduring, manly love. The noblest coronet which any son of man can wear is a crown of thorns. Christian, this is not your rest. Be content to feel that this world is not your home. Homeless upon earth, try more and more to make your home in heaven, above with Christ." 1

Thus, life here and in eternity is continuous. Its great connection is the moral character of the soul. And, as life grows here, so it will grow beyond. For as there are degrees of virtue here on earth, so there are degrees of enjoyment in heaven.

"Brethren, the imputed righteousness of Christ gives every man exactly the same title, the same right, to enjoy heaven, but it does not give to every man the same soul for the enjoy-



ment. Each man remains an individual self, not merged and lost in Christ -- an individual still, with his powers, his character exactly what his time of education upon earth made him. The thief who had but an hour or two of Christian life, and the aged saint who has been disciplined in Christ for seventy years, stand exactly on the same footing so far as title is concerned. The Redeemer's merits are the passport for the penitent. Each has the same heaven, so far they are equal; but unless each can enjoy that heaven with the same intensity, so far they are not equal." 1

His views on immortality are largely Kantian in emphasis, with however, an important difference. Kant seems to postulate heaven as away out from the dilemma of his thought. He cannot combine the good life with the state of Summum Bonum. Kant's heaven is a philosophical concept, and lacks reality. But this is not true of Robertson's eternity. His is not so much the place of the Summum Bonum as it is the necessary continuation of the moral development. Robertson is not greatly interested in the Summum Bonum, and feels that blessedness, which is to him the only happiness ever possible to virtue, is given in this life. To him the Summum Bonum is given here and now in the "Peace which passeth human understanding." His doctrine of immortality is the outgrowth of his moral conscience. Without it he has no interpretation of this world. With it, he possesses the key to the understanding of all life.

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1. Sermons: Fifth Series, p. 28f.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

The doctrine of the Church as found in Robertson's preaching is consistent with the principle of his thought so far as it goes. But it is very apparent that he does not understand the significance of the Catholic doctrine of the Divine Society. Here his thought maintains its connection with his early training as an Evangelical.

The nature of the Church is that of a Society of those who in character seek to resemble the Christ, and who continue his work in the world.

Moreover, within his definition of the Church are many sects and groups of equal right and authority as the Church of God. And he would not have them all united in uniformity:

"And so again, with the unity of Churches. Whereby would we produce unity? Would we force on other Churches our Anglicanism? Would we have our thirty-nine articles, our creeds, our prayers, our rules and regulations, accepted by every Church throughout the world? If that were unity, then in consistency you are bound to demand that in God's world there shall be but one colour instead of the manifold harmony and accordance of which this universe is full; that there should be but one chaunted note - the one which we conceive most beautiful. This is not the unity of the Church of God. The various Churches advance different doctrines and truths. The Church of Germany is something different from those of the Church of England. The Church of Rome, even in its idolatry,

proclaims truths which we would be glad to seize. By the worship of the Virgin, the purity of women; by the rigour of ecclesiastical ordinances, the sanctity and permanence of eternal order; by the very priesthood itself, the necessity of the guidance of man by man. Nay, even the dissenting bodies themselves - mere atoms of aggregates as they are -- stand forward and proclaim at least this truth, the separateness of the individual conscience, the right of independence.

"Peace subsists not between things exactly alike. We do not speak of peace in a single country. We say peace subsists between different countries where war might be. There can be no peace between two men who agree in everything; peace subsists between those who differ. There is no peace between Baptist and Baptist; so far as they are Baptists, there is perfect accord and agreement. There may be peace between you and the Romanist, the Jew, or the Dissenter, because there are angles of sharpness which might come into collision if they were not subdued and softened by the power of love." 1

Man is officially admitted to this society by Baptism. Robertson preached a number of times on the subject of Baptism, for during his ministry at Brighton a famous trial took place between a Rev. Mr. Gorham and the Bishop of Exeter. His doctrine of Baptism is well stated and convincing. He had evaded the desperate theology of the Service of the Church of England. Baptism is the official recognition of an existing fact, and not a miraculous creation of a new humanity.

"Baptism is a visible witness to the world of that which the world is forever forgetting. A common Humanity united in God. Baptism authoritatively reveals and pledges to the individual that which is true of the race. Baptism takes the child and addresses it by name: - Paul, no longer Saul - you are a child of God. Remember it henceforth. It

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1. Sermons: Third Series, p. 134f.



is now revealed to you, and recognised by you, and to recognise God as the Father is to be regenerate. You, Paul, are now regenerate -- you will have foes to fight -- the world, the flesh, and the devil: but remember, they only keep you out of an inheritance which is your own; not an inheritance which you have to win, by some new feeling or merit in yourself. It is yours; you are the child of God -- you are a member of Christ -- you are an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.

"Observe then, baptism does not create a child of God. It authoritatively declares him so. It does not make the fact; it only reveals it. If baptism made it a fact then and there for the first time, baptism would be magic. Nay, faith does not create a child of God any more than baptism, nor does it make a fact. It only appropriates that which is a fact already. For otherwise see what inextricable confusion you fall into. You ask a man to believe, and thereby be created a child of God. Believe what? That God is his Father, But God is not his Father. He is not a child of God, you say, till he believes. Then you ask him to believe a lie.

"Herein lies the error, in basis identical, of the Romanist and the Calvinist. Faith is to one what baptism is to the other, the creator of a fact; whereas they both rest upon a fact, which is a fact whether they exist or not -- before they exist; nay, without whose previous existence both of them are unmeaning and false." 1

But in his discussion of the Apostolic Succession he has entirely misunderstood the meaning of the doctrine. In the quotation offered below, he maintains that the Succession is one of the spirit, and that it is one of prophets and not of priesthood:

"That in which the ministry would seem to be a priestly power is the apostolical succession. This doctrine as stated usually

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1. Sermons: Second Series, p. 55f

is this, that by the imposition of hands, through physical contact, the power of God is conveyed and a Divine right given to the priests. A doctrine such as this rests upon a truth like most other errors; there is an apostolical succession; but it is a succession of prophets and not of priests, it is a succession never extinct or broken; it is a race of prophets not a race of priests, the spirit of those on whom God is breathing out the breath of life and love -- this is the apostolical succession. The Son of God was Himself a prophet, the apostles were prophets, and their spirit has not died out; and so far as we imbibe their spirit, we are their successors. John the Baptist was endued with the same spirit as Elias, and therefore was his successor in a long line: and the great mind of the leader of the reformation was the offspring of the mind of the Apostle Paul; and so far as we evince the spirit of the apostles and prophets shall we keep unbroken the line of the apostolical succession...." 1

But both of these powers are individualistic, and beyond the limits of any society to give. The Apostolic Succession is a doctrine which claims that the Church has given to a certain group of men connected together by the ceremony of laying on of hands, the authority to preserve the tradition of the original Gospel, and to give the Church a center around which it may build her visible unity. The succession of prophets has no more to do with the Apostolic Succession that had the Old Testament prophets a necessary connection with the Succession of the Levites.

Robertson's church is a voluntary organization of men "having the form and desiring the power of Godliness, meeting together the better to help each other to work out their own salvation." 2

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1. Sermons: Second Series, p. 55f

2. General Rules of John Wesley's Societies, 1744

Robertson has no conception of the Church of Jesus Christ, originated by Him, and to which men are required to belong as "citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven." Not once does he speak of the Church as a Divine Society of men and women in which the Holy Spirit dwells incarnate, working out the purposes of God among men. He is too individualistic to see the Divine Society. In this regard he is far removed from the Oxford Movement of his day.



CHAPTER TWELVE

R E T R O S P E C T

In point of time, Robertson belongs to the first half of the nineteenth century; in point of influence, to the last half. His public life covers a period of only thirteen years during which he was not widely known even in his own country. Only after his death was his place as a first-rate religious leader established. Throughout the English speaking world as well as in Germany, his name has been widely cherished and his work more widely influential than that of any other English preacher of the nineteenth century.

To understand and appreciate Robertson's career and character, one must at all times keep in mind the peculiar conditions and circumstances under which he preached. With this fact in mind, consider his achievements in three areas.

A - Robertson as a theologian:

Through the influence of German philosophy and Biblical criticism, translated into English and interpreted by Coleridge and Carlyle and the Oxford scholars, old doctrinal statements and theories were openly questioned and discredited--new theories and interpretations were called for. Churchmen in general were not only confused but genuinely alarmed. The religious world divided between the liberals, who welcomed inquiry and discussion, and the conservatives who discouraged

discussion and stifled inquiry. Having passed through a great personal crisis in his own theological transition, Robertson was able to assist scores of men in his own generation to achieve a satisfactory faith in the midst of intellectual and spiritual unrest, and, through his published sermons, thousands after his death.

Robertson was not content merely to hold liberal opinions in the privacy of his study. In his pulpit he set forth his new views with power and conviction. Respecting his own conscience, he refused to substitute conventional opinion for eternal truth as he understood it.

His sermons cannot be welded into a complete and harmonious theological system. Most of what he taught is based upon the moral nature of man. By obeying the fundamental certainties of the moral consciousness, man achieves his religious faith. Though Robertson is not a theologian in the strict sense of the word, his religious thought is always consistent with his first principle -- it is right to do right. Thus the Kantian doctrine of the Moral Imperative, introduced to English thought by Coleridge, became the basis of Robertson's teaching, and through him, it proved to be the light by which many found their way from theological darkness into the clear light of religious faith.

#### B - Robertson as a Social Reformer:

Not only was theology in transition in Robertson's day, politics, too, were in turmoil and change. He preached in the time of the volcanic outburst of France in 1848 when

Lamartine proclaimed a republic. The cries of "liberty, equality, and fraternity" were heard and debated in England.

An aristocrat by birth and education, nevertheless Robertson shared the hopes of the English common man and rejoiced in the prospective "downfall of old oppressions" and in the "young cries of Freedom." Although conservative in his taste and feelings, he was by conviction and principle a democrat. Denounced as a revolutionist, yet he was not swept away into the alluring currents of socialism. He opposed it on economic and Christian grounds as dangerous to the state and destructive to the liberty it professed to confer. (As we have seen, he should not be classed with Maurice and Kingsley; although sympathetic, he never affiliated himself with them.) The result was that speaking at one time like a Liberal and at another like a Conservative, he was misunderstood by extremists of both parties. His capacity to understand and sympathize with varying viewpoints, even though causing him much personal unhappiness, enabled him to play the important role of mediator on many occasions.

It was not as a social reformer, however, but as a preacher that Robertson secured for himself a place among the immortals.

#### C - Robertson as preacher:

From the very first, his preaching in Brighton created interest and provoked criticism. Many were startled by his peculiar religious views and left the church. Their



places, however, were soon filled by others who were eager for just such realism and straightforward handling of the truth. He had the ability to penetrate beneath appearance to reality and to strip off the husks of meaningless phrases and reveal the kernel of truth in all its power and attractiveness. Doctrine and dogma sprang to life under his touch. Servant girls, working men, shopkeepers, professional men, and leaders of society, recognizing that here was a man who possessed remarkable insight into the human heart, flocked to hear him.

His sermons were distinguished by their high intellectual level. They were more like the profound orations of the philosophers of antiquity than the pulpit discourses of his contemporaries. Blessed with a good mind, possessing extraordinary skill of expression and arrangement, Robertson had the additional advantage of having memorized the New Testament in both Greek and English, and so was able to link all related texts under one head. From this arose his wealth of ideas. In fact, Robertson marks a new epoch in the style of preaching -- it is the epoch of textual analysis and interpretation. His sermons adhere closely to the historic sense of the sacred writers, seeking to understand precisely - and to convey to his hearers - their point of view and intention, and to set forth the full significance of their teaching. Moreover, everything in him -- his imagination, his analytical powers, his personal experience of Christian truth, his vivid apprehension of Christ-- contributed to the Biblical suggestiveness of his sermons. By such preaching he was of immense help to hungry and disquieted

human hearts. By such preaching he was able to convert much nominal Christianity into a vital principle of action; to infuse into men's minds a spirit that would not only manifest itself in the observance of forms and ceremonies, but would exert a practical and beneficial influence upon their daily lives. In all life's myriad experience, he grasped the spirit and scorned the letter. He "felt" a truth before he preached it. Having thus proved in his own life the doctrines which he taught, there rang through all his sermons a decisive "thus saith the Lord."

As the Old Testament prophets, Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, and others, saved ancient Judaism from the growing narrowness and false interpretations of the Scribes and Pharisees, so Robertson and many who were his successors in the same line saved Christianity from errors of doctrine and practice that stifled spiritual life and discredited it in the eyes of the world. Like Horace Bushnell, Robertson may be credited with the wholesome "liberalism" which characterized large areas of Protestantism in the years which followed his life. As a result of his ministry, Christianity, without minimizing doctrine, became more practical, emphasizing the ethical side of the religious life and the importance of the ethical precepts of the New Testament.

What, then, shall we say regarding the influence of his sermons upon his own and succeeding generations? Ian Maclaren, writing at the close of the nineteenth century, says:

"A sermon of his was read when a ship's company were in danger of death; a volume went through the American War in an officer's knapsack. Dean Stanley meets a French military surgeon -- a revolutionary and an unbeliever -- who is deeply interested in Robertson, and the next day an eminent official and a devout Catholic questions the Dean about 'an extraordinary preacher whose name was Frederick Robertson.' Perhaps, however, the test of his work is his power over ministers of all denominations, and his distinction has been to be the preacher's preacher.

"Under his teaching the spirit of the very face of preaching was changed in half the pulpits of our land. The winter of every dreary tradition and wooden doctrine passed and the spring of fresh, living, winsome religious thinking arrived..." 1

Among the earlier appreciative readers of his sermons are to be found such names as Queen Victoria, the Prince Consort, Lord Tennyson, Dean Stanley, Mr. Gladstone, Lord Rosebery, and Lord Balfour. The head of a Japanese college read them regularly to his classes. A student of Professor Adolf Von Harnack quoted him as saying that Germany had never produced a preacher equal to Robertson, or one who had so profoundly influenced the religious views of clergy and laity alike.

At the turn of the century, the Saturday Review in giving a notice of his posthumously published Sermons wrote: "When Mr. Robertson died, his name was scarcely known beyond the circle of his own private friends, and of those among whom

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1. Introduction of Robertson's Sermons, Peoples Edition, page xxxv.



he had laboured in his calling. Now, every word he wrote is eagerly sought for, and affectionately treasured up, and meets with the most reverent and admiring welcome from men of all parties and all shades of opinion.<sup>1</sup>"

From the visitor's book in Trinity Chapel, Brighton, I have copied the following testimonials made in recent months. A visitor from Johannesburg, writes: "His voice still rings in South Africa." A student from London says: "I read his sermons a few years ago, and they influenced me more than anything I have ever read." Still another adds: "In these times of unrest, Robertson's sermons will give to those who read them a deep sense of peace and hope of Christ and a quieting of intellectual doubt." A visitor from New South Wales had this to say: "Of the many things seen and learned during my twelve months in England, not the least will be the pleasure in having visited the great preacher's church whose influence has been and is felt in the church spread even to the remote corners of the world." A Dutch preacher confesses: "I owe more to Robertson's character and sermons than to any other." Other testimonies are recorded by visitors to Trinity Chapel from East Africa Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Holland, America, Kenya, and the British Isles. The vergier of the Chapel told me of an American doctor who came to him one evening and asked to be taken to the grave of Mr. Robertson that he might there lay a wreath in honor of the man "who had changed his life." These

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1. See the Press Notices in Life and Letters, Vol. II, p. 5

testimonies bespeak his continuing influence. In this fourth decade of the Twentieth Century, as in his own, men have called his name blessed.

Such, then, is the influence of a man whose important ministry covered but six brief years.

And so, while it is difficult to estimate the value of any man's work, it is of great interest to note that the three movements in English life which started almost simultaneously merged in the second and third decades of this century. In the Anglo-Catholic theology of the late Bishop Gore, one can see a striking synthesis of the authoritarianism of Pusey, the Socialism of Maurice, and the "philosophy of the good life" developed by Robertson. But the work of Robertson must not be limited to modern Anglo-Catholicism. With the more monumental works of Kant and his German successors, Robertson's religious teachings have penetrated Christian thought and become for multitudes of the world a reasonable and possible road by which the soul of man comes to the knowledge of God.

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1. In view of the fact that Mr. Brooke's Life and Letters includes Mr. Robertson's letters, these books are listed as primary sources.



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